



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

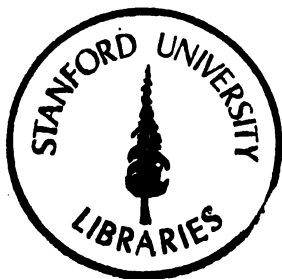
About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

THE
FLED
IRATORS

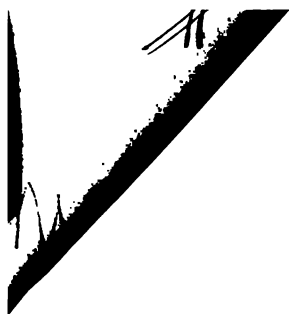
BY

#19



To Mother.

Christmas
1892



THE BAFFLED CONSPIRATORS

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH THE AUTHORS.

LOVELL'S

INTERNATIONAL SERIES OF MODERN NOVELS

No.	RECENT ISSUES.	Cts.
35.	KIT WYNDHAM. By Frank Barrett.....	30
36.	THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE. By G. M. Robins.....	30
37.	ROLAND OLIVER. By Justin McCarthy.....	30
38.	SHEBA. By Rita.....	30
39.	SYLVIA ARDEN. By Oswald Crawford.....	30
40.	YOUNG MR. AINSLIE'S COURTSHIP. By F. C. Phillips.....	30
41.	THE HAUTE NOBLESSE. By G. Manville Fenn.....	30
42.	MOUNT EDEN. By Florence Marryat.....	30
43.	BUTTONS. By John Strange Winter.....	30
44.	NURSE REVEL'S MISTAKE. By Flor. Warden.....	30
45.	ARMINELL. By S. Baring Gould.....	50
46.	THE LAMENT OF DIVES. By Walter Besant.....	30
47.	MRS. BOB. By John Strange Winter.....	30
48.	WAS EVER WOMAN IN THIS HUMOR WOODED. By Chas. Gibbon.....	30
49.	THE MYNNS MYSTERY. By G. Manville Fenn.....	30
50.	HEDRI. By Helen Mathers.....	30
51.	THE BONDMAN. By Hall Caine.....	30
52.	A GIRL OF THE PEOPLE. By L. T. Meade.....	30
53.	TWENTY NOVELETTES. BY TWENTY PROMINENT NOVELISTS.....	30
54.	A FAMILY WITHOUT A NAME. By Jules Verne.....	30
55.	A SYDNEY SOVEREIGN. By Tasma.....	30
56.	A MARCH IN THE RANKS. By Jessie Fothergill.....	30
57.	OUR ERRING BROTHER. By F. W. Robinson.....	30
58.	MISADVENTURE. By W. E. Norris.....	30
59.	PLAIN TALES FROM THE HILLS. By Rudyard Kipling.....	50
60.	DINNA FORGET. By John Strange Winter.....	30
61.	CORSETTE. By Katharine Macquoid.....	30
62.	MASTER OF HIS FATE. By J. MacLaren Cobban.....	30
63.	A VERY STRANGE FAMILY. By F. W. Robinson.....	30
64.	THE KILBURNS. By Annie Thomas.....	30
65.	THE FIRM OF GIRDLESTONE. By A. Conan Doyle.....	50
66.	IN HER EARLIEST YOUTH. By Tasma.....	50
IN THE PRESS.		
67.	THE LADY EGERIA. By J. B. Harwood.....	50
68.	A TRUE FRIEND. By Adeline Sargent.....	50
69.	THE LITTLE CHATELAINE. By The Earl of Desart.....	50
70.	CHILDREN OF TO-MORROW. By William Sharp.....	30
71.	THE HAUNTED FOUNTAIN AND HETTY'S REVENGE. By Katharine S. Macquoid.....	50
72.	A DAUGHTER'S SACRIFICE. By F. C. Phillips and Percy Fendall.....	50
73.	HAUNTINGS. By Vernon Lee.....	50
74.	A SMUGGLER'S SECRET. By Frank Barrett.....	50
75.	KESTELL OF GREYSTONE. By Esme Stuart.....	50
76.	THE TALKING IMAGE OF URUR. By Franz Hartmann, M.D.....	50
77.	A SCARLET SIN. By Florence Marryat.....	50
78.	BY ORDER OF THE CZAR. By Joseph Halton.....	50
79.	THE SIN OF JOOST AVELINGH.....	50
80.	A BORN COQUETTE. By The Duchess.....	50
81.	THE BURNT MILLION. By James Payne.....	50
82.	A WOMAN'S HEART. By Mrs. Alexander.....	50
83.	SYRLIN. By Ouida.....	50
84.	THE RIVAL PRINCES. By Justin McCarthy and Mrs. C. Praed.....	50

Other books by well-known authors are in course of preparation, and will be published at regular intervals.

THE
BAFFLED CONSPIRATORS

A NOVEL

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF "MISADVENTURE," "MY FRIEND JIM," ETC.

NEW YORK
JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY

150 WORTH ST., COR. MISSION PLACE.

PR 5112
N25 B3

COPYRIGHT, 1890,
BY
J. W. LOVELL CO.

THE BAFFLED CONSPIRATORS

CHAPTER I.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLIES



IN a certain evening in the spring of a certain year (it would be possible to be more precise, but for various reasons some degree of vagueness seems desirable), Lord Guise gave a little dinner at his club. He was fond of giving such entertainments—indeed, he belonged to that particular club for no other reason than that it was celebrated for the excellence of the fare which its members were enabled to set before strangers—but, either because he did not think it worth while to trouble himself about congruity, or because he was persuaded

that incongruity is more amusing, he never chose his guests with any regard to the question of whether they were likely to suit each other or not. Assuredly he must have been aware that the three whom he had invited on the present occasion could have little in common, unless it might be an appreciation of good cooking and good wine.

First there was his old friend and former schoolfellow, Percy Thorold, a handsome, square-faced, dark-haired, and rather serious-looking man of a little over thirty, who had entered Parliament at an early age, had soon won distinction as a debater, and was now a Junior Lord of the Treasury. Then there was that very good-looking and, as most people were inclined to think, hopelessly good - for - nothing young fellow, Eustace Moreton. Moreton had been in the Guards for a time ; but had resigned his commission,

averring that he could not stand the expense. Whether he or his father found it a less expensive plan that he should reside in London without any profession at all, may be open to doubt; but at all events he had no means of earning his living, nor prospect of any, nor desire for any. He was clean-shaven, in obedience to the latest edict of fashion; he had curly fair hair which grew low down upon his broad forehead; his sleepy blue eyes expressed languid contentment with a world which had treated him, upon the whole, quite as well as he could expect. Socially he was much in request, for he was a good dancer, did not object to London balls, and knew how to make himself agreeable. Finally, there was little Mr. Schneider, of whom not much was known either by his host or by anybody else, except that he had a great deal of money, that he was to be seen driving

four-in-hand in the Park and elsewhere, that his late father had been a German banker, and that he was very anxious to gain a firm foothold in society. Of the four, Lord Guise himself was the eldest and by far the least smart in appearance. His hair, which he wore rather longer than is the custom in these days, was not very carefully brushed; he had a short reddish beard; his clothes fitted him loosely; his features were large and irregular. Altogether he was a commonplace-looking person, although, as he was the eldest son of a duke, many people had been able to discover in him an air of distinction. He passed for being eccentric; but this, perhaps, only meant that his manners were not as good as they might have been, and that he was still unmarried.

That Lord Guise remained a bachelor, notwithstanding the many seductive and

more or less direct invitations which he had received to change his condition, was due not in the least to eccentricity, but to his profound conviction that when a man binds himself for life to any woman, the chances are at least ten to one that that man will sooner or later rue an act of irreparable folly. He was fond of saying this, and he was saying it now to his three guests, who listened to him with a good deal of interest and attention.

“Marriage as an institution is a necessity, of course,” he observed, in his slow, slightly drawling accents; “nobody would think of disputing that. What I protest against is the English system of arranging marriages. What the deuce has love to say to the question? Is any man such a consummate ass as to believe that he will be in love with the same woman all his life long?”

"I can imagine a man being ass enough for that," Thorold said, with a slight smile.

"Well, on second thoughts, so can I. In point of fact, that is just what one does imagine each time that one falls in love. I put it wrongly; what I ought to have said was that no man can be such an ass as to believe in the perpetual duration of another man's love."

"Or of a woman's love," added Moreton, sighing, and gazing sentimentally into his empty champagne glass.

Lord Guise made a sign to the waiter, and resumed his homily.

"The reason why so many married people hate each other is that they have started with an absurd promise to perform impossibilities. One should begin as one means to go on, and if they were to set out with a good, quiet feeling of mutual regard, it is probable enough that they would manage

to pull through without much discomfort. I don't say that matrimony under any circumstances would be enjoyable; but it might be made endurable."

Little Mr. Schneider, who had a round rosy face and projecting eyes, nodded approvingly and rapped the table.

"Just so!" he exclaimed; "I thoroughly agree with you."

"I thought you would," observed Lord Guise, drily; "you generally do, you know. But what about you, Thorold? Do *you* agree with me?"

In truth, his harangue, though ostensibly general in its scope, had been intended to apply specially to an individual case; and this intention was no secret to Mr. Thorold, who answered:

"Oh, I dare say you are right. Personally, I shouldn't much care to marry upon the French plan; but very likely it works

better than ours in the majority of instances. However, it doesn't greatly signify whether you are right or wrong, because you will hardly bring about a revolution in the national ideas."

"I don't know that," said Lord Guise. "Every movement must be started by somebody, and humble as I am, I may be the first to set the ball rolling in the right direction. Not that I should advocate the adoption of the French system without reserve; the mother-in-law is too prominent a personage in French households for my taste. All I want men to see is that having fallen in love with a woman isn't a good reason for marrying her—quite the contrary. It is obvious that the very worst judge of a woman is a man who is in love with her. Perhaps you'll admit that much, Thorold?"

The eyes of his two fellow-guests were

turned expectantly and with some covert amusement upon the young politician, whose engagement to a very well-known lady had recently been broken off, and who was supposed to be not a little sore about the affair. He shrugged his shoulders and replied :

“Oh, certainly ; I’ll admit that much. But after all, the question is only one of degree ; what do we know of women even when we are not in love with them ? The best plan is to give them a wide berth.”

“Only that’s impossible,” observed Lord Guise. “Shall we go upstairs and smoke now ?”

The subject was dropped for the moment, but was resumed later on in the smoking-room by Eustace Moreton, who professed sentiments of the most atrocious cynicism with regard to the opposite sex. His career, though brief, had been eventful in an

amatory sense, and in the matter of constancy he had not appeared to shine conspicuously; but he now assured his hearers that in no single instance had he been the first to cool off.

"My belief," said he, solemnly, "is that women *never* care for a fellow for his own sake. Their one object is to entice him into marrying them, and the moment they find out that he isn't quite prepared to go such frightful lengths they chuck him aside like an old glove."

This opinion of the utter unreasonableness of women received confirmation from Mr. Schneider, who nodded his head, and remarked sententiously, "I'm quite with you there, Moreton." Mr. Schneider was one of those charming but too rare people who never contradict.

"Let us endeavour to be just even to women, who are so seldom just to us," said

Lord Guise. "It is only just to them to say that in some respects they are not half such fools as we are, and it would be unjust to blame them, situated as they are, for wanting to get married. Of course they want to get married, and of course they do their best to hook us. But why are we always in such a hurry to swallow the hook? That's what I want to know."

"Some of us don't," observed Thorold.

"H'm! Some of us have the good luck to be thrown back into the water because we were too easily caught."

Thorold opened his lips to reply, but, thinking better of it, twirled his moustache, and held his peace.

"What we require," Lord Guise went on, "is a Bachelors' Mutual Aid and Protection Society. As I said before, it's absurd to blame the women, who only follow their natural predatory instincts. The best of

them do it ; but goodness knows there are plenty of bad ones about ; and how is a poor innocent male creature to cope with them ? Given a certain amount of good looks, they must be clumsy indeed if they can't make us lose our heads—after which we are done for. Not a season passes without my hearing of half-a-dozen captures which are simply heartrending."

"You yourself have escaped so far, however," remarked Thorold.

"Only because I am blessed with an exceptionally phlegmatic temperament. If I had yielded to first impulses I should have been a miserable slave at this hour. You're a rich man ; so you ought to know something of the temptations which we have to contend against."

"Without being a rich man," chimed in Moreton, "I may say that I know something of them. Nobody is more devoted to women

than I am—or more convinced that they are one and all humbugs.”

Mr. Schneider gave it to be understood that his own experience had led him to a similar melancholy conclusion.

“But how,” asked Thorold, “do you propose to remedy this distressing state of things?”

“As I tell you,” answered Lord Guise: “by the establishment of a Mutual Protection Society. A man from the moment that he falls in love becomes *non compos mentis*. His friends ought to take charge of him for his own good; but of course they can’t do that unless he has given them the necessary authority while still in possession of his senses. One has often heard of unfortunate fellows with a constitutional disposition for drink, who, when they felt the fit coming on, have gone of their own free will, and had themselves shut up in institutions where

liquor couldn't be obtained. Well, I should suggest the application of that principle to matrimony. When a man finds that he is upon the brink of making a fool of himself, let him go to his friends and say: 'Look here, if you fellows don't hold me back, I shall propose in a day or two to Miss A, or Lady B. In my opinion she is an angel; but I am aware that in my present condition my opinion isn't worth a straw. Now you must do the best you can for me.' I'm quite serious," added Lord Guise, observing a broad smile upon the faces of his audience.

"And what would you do with the poor lover when he threw himself upon your protection in that pathetic way?" asked Thorold. "Would you lock him up?"

"Well, no, he could hardly expect me to take all that trouble. Besides, I am not sure that it would be legal. My idea would be that each member of the society should bind

himself to be guided by the instructions of his friends for a certain length of time—say six months. Of course, they might sanction his marriage at once; but if they saw that he was about to commit moral suicide, they would tell him that he mustn't see or speak to the lady for another half-year. When that time was up he would be free to dash his head against a brick wall if he chose; but the chances are that the interval afforded him for sober reflection would be sufficient. Why shouldn't we four make a start here and now? We seem to be pretty well agreed, and we're none of us in love at present, are we?"

"Not more than usual," answered Moreton, speaking for himself.

"Not the least bit in the world," answered Mr. Schneider, complacently.

Thorold, after a brief pause, said: "I believe I may swell the chorus. Everybody

knows that I was engaged to my cousin, Lady Belvoir, a short time ago, and that I am not engaged to her now. As the affair was broken off by mutual consent, it may be assumed that there is no longer any love lost between us."

"I'm glad you mentioned that, Thorold," observed Lord Guise, leaning back in his chair and blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. "I didn't like to cite your case without your permission, though it's very much in point."

"I have no objection to your citing it; but is it in point?"

"Well — isn't it? A more fortunate escape I never heard of. Heaven forbid that I should call Sybil Belvoir a suitable wife for any man; but of all men in the world I can't imagine one less suited to be her husband than you."

"Oh, very likely," returned Thorold,

with a touch of impatience. "I don't see how that makes mine a case in point, though. We found out our unsuitability for ourselves; we weren't indebted to you or any other friend for the discovery."

Lord Guise smiled very slightly.

"You have escaped," he said; "but you have had an uncommonly narrow shave. What I meant was that if you had belonged to our Protection Society, you would never have been allowed to run such a risk. Now, would either of you fellows—of course, this is a confidential conversation, and what we say between ourselves will go no farther—would either of you have permitted Thorold to marry Lady Belvoir?"

"Rather not!" exclaimed Moreton.

Mr. Schneider was less emphatic, and more prolix; but the upshot of his remarks was that if he had been given any power in the matter, he really would not have been

able to reconcile it with his conscience to sanction such a union.

“ You see,” said Lord Guise, turning to Thorold, “ that you would have been in safe hands. For my own part, I have known Sybil Belvoir pretty nearly all her life——”

“ So have I,” interrupted Thorold.

“ Exactly ; you have known her without knowing her. Everybody in London—even our friend Schneider, who, I believe, has never exchanged a word with her—seems to have been better acquainted with her than you were. For that matter, her history speaks for itself. She was hardly out of the schoolroom when she insisted, against the wish of all her own people, upon marrying Belvoir—who is dead now, so we’ll say no more about him, except that he drank himself to death. As you are aware, it wasn’t exactly a happy marriage. Since she became a widow, she has flirted — to put it

mildly—with every man, eligible or ineligible, whom she thought it might amuse her to ensnare ; she has——”

Here Thorold interrupted the speaker for the second time.

“ I don’t think we need go into all that,” he said.

“ Very well ; we won’t. I merely wished to point out to you that a woman who has made herself so unpleasantly notorious can still manage to deceive even a clever fellow like you.”

Moreton said very gravely that Lady Belvoir was a downright bad lot—“ about as bad as they make them,”—and for a moment it looked as if Mr. Schneider was about to express verbal concurrence. But Mr. Schneider, upon reflection, contented himself with wagging his head. Lady Belvoir, bad though she might be, was after all a leader of society, and one should not speak

evil of magnates—that is, until one has lost all hope of being invited to their houses.

“It isn’t every man,” Lord Guise resumed, presently, “who can expect to have Thorold’s luck. Yesterday it was his turn ; to-morrow, my poor Schneider, it may be yours. With your great personal and—er—financial advantages, you occupy a perilous position, and ought to be very careful. As for Moreton, he is exposed to dangers of a somewhat different kind, but not the less real on that account. I myself am not, perhaps, very likely to fall a victim at this time of day ; still, one should never be too arrogant. Let us, therefore, while we are still in full possession of our senses, agree to form square, as it were, and to stand shoulder to shoulder and back to back against the common foe.”

Little Mr. Schneider looked much flattered. He was pleased that his social

advantages should be recognised, and still more pleased that he should be invited to take any sort of engagement upon him in such good company. He at once signified his willingness to do as he was requested; and Eustace Moreton followed suit, with the remark that he was always grateful to anybody who would take care of him. Only Thorold, whose attention had wandered a little during the last few minutes, demurred.

“What is this desperate practical joke that you want to play upon us, Guise?” he asked.

“It isn’t a practical joke at all; it’s practical earnest, and I have already explained my object,” answered Lord Guise. “In case of necessity, we are to have the power of ensuring each other a breathing space of six months, that’s all. Now I’ll administer the form of oath — or, if you prefer it, you shall be at liberty to affirm.

Perhaps it will be sufficient for us to bind ourselves by our honour as gentlemen."

The smoking-room was now all but deserted, the members of the club who had been dining there having gone away, while those who were spending the evening at theatres or parties had not yet come in. In one of the far corners a fat man, with his hat tilted over his eyes, was slumbering stertorously; a little nearer, another was nodding over the evening paper.

"I think," said Lord Guise, "that we may proceed to business without fear of being betrayed."

Accordingly the four men drew their chairs close together, and each in turn solemnly repeated the following formula:

"I promise upon my honour as a gentleman that if from this day forth I should at any time form the intention of asking a lady to become my wife, I will at once call a

meeting of this society to consider my intention, and make such inquiries as may be thought necessary. I also promise upon my honour as a gentleman that in the event of a majority of the society deciding against the lady in question, I will abstain for the space of six clear calendar months from the date of such decision from holding any communication with her, whether verbal or written, direct or indirect."

"That about finishes *me*," observed Eustace Moreton; "I may now look forward to a lonely old age. Hitherto I have always thought that, if the worst came to the worst, I might fall back upon the customary elderly heiress; but now that bright vision must be dismissed. No heiress, however elderly, could be expected to stand total desertion for six months at a stretch."

"My dear fellow," said Lord Guise,

“why should you take it for granted that the society would decide against the elderly heiress? For my part, if I believed her to be a sensible, well-conducted person, I should give my vote in her favour. Our object is to promote one another’s happiness, and nobody who knows you can doubt that you would be happier with an elderly woman than with a young one. Sensible elderly women make allowances — which you are pretty sure to require.”

Thorold rose to wish his host good-night. In doing so he thought it necessary to mention that it was from a purely unselfish motive that he had joined the newly-constituted society. He himself, he declared, was a non-marrying man, and proposed to remain so. If, however, he could be instrumental by voice or vote in restraining others from the commission of an act of folly, he should, of course, be very glad.

"I wonder," chuckled Mr. Schneider, after he had gone, "which of us will be the first to call a meeting. I shouldn't be surprised if it were Thorold, in spite of what he says, and I shouldn't be much surprised if he were to contemplate proposing a second time to Lady Belvoir."

"That only shows, my dear Schneider," remarked Lord Guise, "that, notwithstanding your natural acuteness, you haven't quite taken Thorold's measure. He has had a thorough sickener of women of the world; the next person with whom he will fall in love will be a pious little girl who goes to church on week-days, and makes undergarments for the poor."

Schneider and Moreton walked away together.

"Is Lady Belvoir really as bad as she is made out?" asked the former of the latter with some curiosity.

“Worse,” answered Moreton, laconically.
“I only know her slightly ; but I have heard quite enough about her. I can forgive a woman for being wicked,” he added ; “not being over and above good myself, I am able to sympathise with the failings of others. But I’ll be hanged if I can forgive a woman who has no heart !”

CHAPTER II.

MISS LESLIE

IT so happened that while the abominable conspiracy just described was being hatched in St. James's Street, two ladies, seated comfortably before the fire in a luxuriously-furnished drawing-room in Carlton House Terrace, were discussing the chief conspirator after a fashion which it may safely be assumed that that self-satisfied nobleman would not have liked, if he could have heard it.

"Lord Guise," Lady Belvoir was saying, "is one of those unfortunate men who flatter themselves that they thoroughly understand women. I have noticed that people of that kind invariably end by coming to signal

grief. Sometimes they marry their cooks, sometimes they do even worse; but they always marry. Lord Guise has a holy horror of me, and loses no opportunity of telling me so. If it were at all worth the trouble, I really think I would marry him myself, just to show him how very easily the thing can be done."

Lady Belvoir was under the impression that she could marry anybody; and it is not for a very humble member of the opposite sex to assert that she was mistaken. That she had not married Percy Thorold was doubtless due to the circumstance that, after full consideration, she had not chosen to do so; that she had married that utterly disreputable and almost uncivilised personage, the late Lord Belvoir, was a proof that her powers of fascination were of no mean order. The power of beauty, at all events, she possessed to its

fullest extent. Tall, superbly modelled, and gifted with a pair of large, liquid brown eyes, which were of a nature (as eyes so often are) to mislead physiognomists, she had shone without a rival during her first season, and now, at the age of four-and-twenty, was very generally spoken of as the handsomest woman in London. Her mouth was perhaps a trifle hard at times, though rather in expression than in form, and it might have been predicted that in another ten years her nose would be too decidedly aquiline and the line of her jaw too strongly defined. However, as she herself would have said, it really cannot matter much what a woman's nose and jaw may look like after she has passed her thirtieth year. She was believed to be extremely wealthy; but as a matter of fact her jointure did not reach the figure commonly ascribed to it, and she lived extravagantly. Of suitors she had no

lack, nor was she likely to lack them for a long time to come.

"But of course it wouldn't be worth while," her companion said, quickly. "I don't understand why you ever think it worth while to make conquests of men whom you don't care for. The process must be very disagreeable for you, I should think, and everybody knows that you can do it if you like."

"Oh, the process isn't so disagreeable," answered Lady Belvoir, laughing; "and as for Lord Guise, he doesn't know that I could do it if I liked. That's just the point."

"Are you really going to take the trouble of convincing him, then?" Miss Leslie asked, with a somewhat disgusted look.

Dorothy Leslie was a girl of eighteen who had been brought up to London by

her mother to be presented at one of the first Drawing-Rooms of the year, and to make her *début* in society, in so far as society might prove willing to open its doors to people who had not a great many influential acquaintances. Whether Lady Belvoir ought or ought not to be included in that category, Mrs. Leslie was not quite sure, nor had she felt altogether easy about the intimacy which had sprung up between her daughter and the notorious lady whose dower-house was situated near their home in the north. Dorothy, however, was given to forming her own opinions and choosing her own friends; and Dorothy liked Lady Belvoir, although she so little resembled her. What was, perhaps, more to the purpose, was that Lady Belvoir liked Dorothy. Lady Belvoir may have had her good qualities—if so, they were not very perceptible to the ordinary male intelligence;

still, she may have had them, because almost everybody has—and it is conceivable that freshness, candour, and an unquestioning faith in the precepts and doctrines of the Established Church may have been attractive to her, as reminding her of days when she herself had been equally unsophisticated. In any case, she had made a friend of this girl, who, it would perhaps be both ungracious and unfair to remark, was not pretty enough to be her rival.

The standard of beauty seems to vary as much and as often as do the points of a dog, so that it is really impossible to tell from year to year what will take a prize; but even in these days, when irregularity of feature is esteemed a charm, it is probable that few people would have said in so many words that they considered Dorothy Leslie a pretty girl. On the other hand, a great many people admired her very much. Her

iron-gray eyes, at all events, were worthy of admiration, and her dark hair grew abundantly. She had, moreover, a neat little figure and a singularly pleasant voice.


In answer to her question, Lady Belvoir said :

“Oh, I don’t know ; most likely not. I have known him for a long time without having taken that trouble. Just at present I am rather provoked with him because he is under the impression that it was he who broke off my engagement to Percy Thorold, and I am sure he is hinting as much to everybody who will listen to him.”

“Had he anything to do with it?” Miss Leslie asked, after a pause.

“Not he ! He did his best—for Percy’s sake, of course—to persuade me that I was going to make a very great mistake ; but I had found that out without his help. There was a time,” continued Lady Belvoir,

with a retrospective vawn, "when I was seriously enamoured of Percy. He was a good many years younger then, and I was very young indeed—a mere child, in fact. I remember promising in a vague sort of way to marry him some day. Well, then I married poor Belvoir, and Percy, like a good many others, was shocked. I didn't see much of him until I was free again, and then he came back, and I was touched by his constancy, and so before I knew where I was, lo and behold, I was engaged to him! But it would never have done. He is a good fellow, but he has old-fashioned ideas, and he has gone in strongly for politics, which bore me to death. Besides, he disapproved of my ways and style of conversation, and he took to expressing his disapproval, which was intolerable. He pretended to be quite cut up when I told him that I had had enough of him; but in



reality he was just as relieved to be set at liberty as I was. We are now the best of friends. I think you would like him, because he is awfully clever, and takes serious views of life, as you do, and he is going to be Prime Minister or something of that kind before he dies. Come and meet him some evening at dinner, will you?"

"Thank you; I should like it very much," answered Dorothy. "But — but does he still come to dinner with you?"

"He will if I ask him; why shouldn't he? We are cousins, you know, and, as I tell you, we are very good friends. Added to which, it would be a little too ridiculous to allow oneself to be cut by all the men whom one has been obliged to throw over."

Percy Thorold had never had the least intention of cutting his cousin, and she was not far wrong in her assertion

that the recovery of liberty had been as welcome to him as it had been to her. That she and he were the best of friends, was, however, not quite so accurate a statement. She had treated him a little too badly for that, and although he no longer loved her, he had been in love with her for a great many years. He was glad to have been jilted, but he could not altogether forgive the jilt; nor, in truth, is any man likely to forgive a woman who has destroyed his faith in all women. Nevertheless, he accepted her invitation to dinner for the following Sunday, his chief reason for doing so being that he did not want her or anybody else to imagine that he was brooding over his wrongs.

Dorothy Leslie received a somewhat hesitating permission from her mother to be present at the same informal gathering.

"I don't quite like Sunday dinner-

parties," said Mrs. Leslie, who, perhaps, did not realise the difficulties experienced by modern legislators in meeting their friends on any other evening in the week. "And I think," she added, more reasonably, "that Lady Belvoir ought sometimes to ask me. She seems to forget my existence."

Lady Belvoir had not forgotten that there was a Mrs. Leslie; but her impression was that Mrs. Leslie was a bore, and she would no more have thought of asking a bore to one of her little dinners, than of offering uneatable food to her guests. These little dinners, which she had taken to giving since her widowhood, were in a fair way to become famous. She had a *chef* who was master of his craft; she "knew everybody worth knowing"—according to a phrase which may perhaps be misleading, yet is accurate enough for its purpose—and without giving herself much trouble about it, she was

always able to bring together people who were likely to get on well together. Percy Thorold, for example, got on remarkably well with Miss Leslie, whom he took in to dinner, and in whom he was delighted to recognise a girl as yet untainted with "the something that infects the world." The world, at which we are all apt to rail as we approach middle age, is doubtless what we choose to think it or make it. In the opinion of this rising statesman it was a melancholy failure, inhabited by millions of toilers and sufferers, and governed by a few thousands, who, upon the whole, used their power selfishly and unwisely. He was a Conservative because he believed that, bad as the existing state of things is, it would be even worse were the toiling and suffering millions to get the upper hand ; at heart and in theory, he was probably an advanced Radical. The upper class, to

which he himself belonged, he considered to be almost, if not altogether rotten, allowing it no virtue save that of courage, and foreseeing without desiring its inevitable submersion. Probably he would have entertained a higher opinion of it, if Lady Belvoir had been a good woman; but he had not pushed self-analysis quite so far as to have divined that circumstance.

To such a pessimist it was naturally refreshing to encounter a young woman of his own station whose ideas were simple and direct, who did not affect the uninformed scepticism which has become fashionable, who had brought a tolerably clear intelligence to bear upon contemporary politics, and who did not in the least despair of the future glory and greatness of her native land.

“I think you are quite wrong to sneer at politics,” she said, after she had led him to confide certain views of his to her; “and

I don't believe you are sincere, either. If you are really convinced that all your party or any other party cares for is office, and if you yourself don't care for it, why do you waste your time in the House of Commons, when you might be hunting, or shooting, or budding roses, or amusing yourself in some pleasant, healthy way?"

"Because I am idiot enough to be ambitious, I suppose," he answered, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Because, like the other fools, I really rather enjoy the idea of being pointed at and gaped at."

"No; because you hope to leave the world a little better than you found it."

"Oh, I am not so ambitious or so sanguine as all that," answered Thorold, laughing. He shrank, as most Englishmen do, from ascribing high motives to himself, and even from hearing them ascribed to him. Still, he knew that the girl's estimate

of him was true enough, and how could he help admiring her penetration in having discovered a secret which he had been at such pains to conceal? He found, too, that there were many points in respect of which her tastes were identical with his own. She was very fond of music; she loved a country life; she did not particularly care for what she had seen of the society of London; nor was she more passionately devoted to dancing than a girl of her age ought to be. All this made her a pleasant companion in spite of her sex; and, after all, it was not the poor thing's fault that she had been born a woman. As for the other women present, they were women of the world, and, by that fact alone, odious for the time being in Thorold's eyes. Therefore it was that he scarcely spoke a word to anybody but Miss Leslie the whole evening, and that, when he took his leave,

Lady Belvoir looked at him with a peculiar smile and raised eyebrows.

"Already!" she said.

"Already what?" he inquired.

"Already consoled. Don't mind me, pray; my vanity is proof against any wounds of that kind. You see, my dear Percy, I haven't the shadow of a doubt that I could whistle you back if I wished—which Heaven forbid!"

Thorold's laugh did not very successfully conceal his annoyance.

"You have my full permission to try," he could not help saying.

"Thanks; but I won't take advantage of your generosity. I have too vivid a recollection of certain lectures. You will never have to lecture Dorothy Leslie, who is a nice girl in every way, and will suit you admirably. I shall have much pleasure in introducing you to her mother any day

you like, and I shall at once begin saving up my pocket-money, so as to be able to buy a handsome wedding present for you. Good night."

Thorold did not trouble himself to contradict her. He went away with a comfortable conviction that he was now entirely heart-whole, and tolerably certain of remaining so. Still, regarding Miss Leslie, as he was able to do, in a dispassionate, paternal sort of light, he quite agreed with Lady Belvoir that she was a very nice girl, and he was sorry that there seemed to be so little likelihood of his ever meeting her again.

CHAPTER III.

FORTUNATE MR. SCHNEIDER

LITTLE Mr. Schneider was one of those fortunate mortals whose lot appears, and may well appear, enviable to the rest of humanity. His wealth was practically boundless; he had no estates, no relations, no duties, or worries, or responsibilities of any kind; and if he had also no mentionable ancestors, that is but a very small misfortune in the days in which we live. Nevertheless, like ninety-nine hundredths of our perverse race, he was not satisfied, and the reason of his dissatisfaction was that, in spite of all his lavish expenditure, he had not yet succeeded in taking the society of the British

metropolis by storm. This feat he was passionately, pathetically desirous of accomplishing, and there is no saying what price he would have considered too heavy to pay for the privilege of admission into those inner circles on the edge of which he hovered with longing, wistful eyes. His ambition was not a very exalted nor a very sensible one, but at least it was harmless; and, in truth, little Mr. Schneider was a harmless little man, though, of course, he would not have liked to be so described. His impression of himself was that he was a terrible fellow and that the pace at which he lived was enough to take anybody's breath away. The pace at which he drove was certainly calculated to produce that effect upon those who sat behind him; but this was because he had not the slightest control over his horses and was blessed with the sublime courage of ignorance.

It is impossible to say how he managed to get his coach in and out of the Park and through the crowded streets of London without killing himself and his freight; probably he might have been less lucky on a stretch of country road. That he always found plenty of people willing to accompany him on these perilous excursions only shows what risks the impecunious Briton will face unflinchingly. At race-meetings, Mr. Schneider's round, rosy face had latterly become observed by all observers, not so much on account of the animals that he owned, although he always had a few in training, as of the prodigious bets with which he alternately delighted and exasperated the bookmakers.

That indolent cynic, Lord Guise, took him up, thinking that some amusement might be got out of him. Lord Guise *valued* London society about as much as

everybody values what is to be had for the asking. He knew, what many less highly-placed individuals have discovered, that this society is not composed of specially agreeable or talented or even well-bred units; and that, unlike that of most European capitals, its doors will always yield to the pressure of a golden key. He himself, therefore, did not care to figure prominently at its gatherings; but he was willing enough to fit little Schneider's golden latchkey into the lock for him. Few things tickled him more than to watch the dealings of nobly-born ladies with rich *parvenus*. The ladies, he had noticed, almost invariably have to swallow more dirt than the *parvenus*; and if they make ugly faces over it, as they sometimes do, that is great fun.

"I think you said you didn't know Lady Belvoir," he remarked one day to his *protégé*. "Would you like to know her?"

This was very much the same thing as asking a struggling artist whether he would like to know the President of the Royal Academy, or a subaltern whether he would like to know the Commander-in-Chief; but Schneider, who had studied the manners of the best young men of the day, felt it incumbent upon him to dissemble his glee. He looked down at his boots, sighed wearily, and muttered something of which the word "delighted" was alone intelligible.

"Oh, not unless you wish," said Lord Guise, laughing. "I only thought that, as you are fond of going to parties, you might care to be invited to hers. Besides, she has personal merits. Somebody said of some woman or other that to know her was a liberal education. Well, it's quite an education to know Sybil Belvoir; though I don't say that it's quite the sort of *education* which I should select for my

son, if I were unfortunate enough to have a son."

"I dare say she won't be able to tell me much that I don't know," observed Mr. Schneider, with a complacent smile.

"I suppose not," assented Lord Guise, gravely. "She sometimes makes me open my eyes; but then I'm wonderfully innocent for my age. Well, then, I'll introduce you to her at Paddington House to-night. By the way, are you going to Paddington House? Not had a card? Never mind; you can dine with me, and we'll go on there together. That will be all right."

Schneider had much ado to keep himself from jumping for joy. Hitherto he had derived little social advantage from his intimacy with Lord Guise; but this was an offer of which he somewhat exaggerated the generosity and significance. The Duchess of Paddington was a great lady, and the

Duke was great even among dukes: but perhaps they were a little too great to be exclusive. At any rate, when they threw open their magnificent ballroom, the crowd which poured into it was apt to contain quite as many nobodies as celebrities. There was not the least fear of their objecting to the entrance of any uninvited guest for whom Lord Guise might see fit to make himself responsible. Not realising this, Mr. Schneider arrayed himself with more than usual care and joyfully accompanied his kind sponsor to the big house of which the outside is known to all Londoners, and the inside to not a few. His reception was most gratifying, for the Duchess shook hands with him, and the Duke, he was flattered to find, knew quite well who he was.

“I’ve often seen you at Newmarket, Mr. Schneider,” said that good-natured magnate ;

"in fact, you are a racing man, I believe, are you not?"

"Oh, only in a very modest way," answered Schneider, who was doubtful whether he ought not to say "your Grace," but decided that it would be safer to omit that ceremonious form of address.

"H'm! I don't know about modest; you're the terror of the ring, they tell me. As for me, I've been racing all my life and never had a bet; but I'm exceptional, I suppose."

The Duke was exceptionally wealthy, and could therefore afford to race without betting; but Schneider, not liking to remind him of that, merely observed that a race would hardly seem like a race unless one had something on it.

"Ah, there it is," returned the Duke; "you young fellows don't care about sport for its own sake. Not one in ten of you can tell a good horse from a bad one, either."

One does not like to have such dreadful things as that said to one even by a duke, and of course they are all the more painful when they are said in a perfectly good-natured and matter-of-course way. Mr. Schneider, somewhat abashed, fell back and surveyed the company, amongst which he was quite sorry to recognise so many people whom he knew. It was satisfactory that they should see him at Paddington House; but it was less satisfactory to see them there. He would much have preferred that they should be made aware of the high society to which he had been admitted by the newspapers on the following morning.

Meanwhile, his interests were not being neglected by his introducer. Lord Guise shouldered his way through the throng towards Lady Belvoir, whom he found dancing with his friend Eustace Moreton, and with whom he entered into conversation,

altogether disregarding the presence of her partner.

"What particular mischief are you up to now?" he began by inquiring. "I suppose you never go to a ball without designs upon some poor beggar's peace of mind, do you?"

"I go to balls to dance," answered Lady Belvoir; "I thought you never went to balls at all. To what do we owe this unusual treat?"

"I suppose, if I said I came here to meet you, you would think I was telling a lie, wouldn't you?" asked Lord Guise.

"No," she answered; "I shouldn't think so; I should be sure of it. I often wonder why you dislike me so much, considering that I have never done you the smallest injury."

"It isn't dislike; it's fear. You are so irresistible, you know."

Lady Belvoir sighed, and allowed those

large, and rather melancholy eyes of hers to rest upon his face for a moment. Then she suddenly broke into a laugh.

"Don't be alarmed," she said. "However irresistible I may be, you shall not be called upon to resist me. I don't want to be rude; but we are such old friends that I'm sure you won't mind my saying how instinctively I shrink from ugly men. Not as friends, of course; only I can't tolerate them as admirers."

"Never?" asked Lord Guise, without wincing. "I'm sorry for that, because I was rather thinking of introducing an ugly man to you to-night; and it goes without saying that he would have become an admirer if you had consented to make his acquaintance."

"I dare say I may consent," Lady Belvoir answered. "Who is he—and where is he—and why do you want to

introduce him to me? Mr. Moreton, I see you are dying to get away; don't let me keep you any longer. Lord Guise will find a seat for me somewhere."

And when Moreton had acted upon this hint, and a vacant sofa had been discovered for her, she repeated her inquiries as to the ugly unknown.

"Upon second thoughts," said Lord Guise, "I am not sure that he is ugly—at least, not very. He is quite young, which is a beauty in itself; and he has a round face and an empty head, and he employs a good tailor, and his name is Schneider. Is that categorical enough?"

"Oh, the little man who makes the big bets! He has any amount of shekels, hasn't he?"

"Well, he has plenty of coins of some kind; but he isn't a Jew, if that is what you mean—and if it matters. It was my

good nature that made me think of presenting him to you. I know it would give him the most unfeigned delight to be placed on your visiting list; and, taking him all round, he is quite as well-behaved as the generality of your intimates."

"Go and fetch him," answered Lady Belvoir. "At least, he can't be worse-behaved than you are."

"And most certainly he behaves better than you do, my dear Sybil. But that isn't high praise."

"I should have thought," observed Lady Belvoir, quietly, "you might have found out by this time that I don't consider your rude speeches in the least entertaining."

"I have found it out, and it has always surprised me. If I were in your place, I should feel that they lent variety to life, and should quite enjoy them. But I suppose *no woman knows* what it is to be satiated

.

with flattery. Now I will go and get my poor little Schneider, who will flatter you to the top of your bent, if you don't frighten him."

Lady Belvoir had no intention of doing that. That she proposed to make a conquest of the innocent Schneider was a matter of course. That was what she always proposed to do, and always did with each fresh male acquaintance. But in his case she was influenced by a half-formed ulterior motive.

"He might do," she mused. 'If he is really as rich as they say he is, he might possibly do."

The truth was that Lady Belvoir's financial position was far from satisfactory. For some time past she had been living considerably beyond her income, and there were moments when she felt seriously alarmed about the future. At such moments

she naturally contemplated putting herself up for sale ; so that she was prepared to give Mr. Schneider the chance of offering the very high price which she was entitled to demand. There are many different ways of being proud. Lady Belvoir's pride of birth (she had no pride of any other kind) took the form of almost total indifference with regard to what is generally considered the important question of alliances. There was very little blood in England as good as hers ; and her view was that, if she had to stoop at all, she would incur no great additional obloquy by stooping as low as a Schneider.

She was a woman of exceedingly quick perceptions, and before she had exchanged half-a-dozen words with the little man who addressed her with that kind of shyness which displays itself in an affectation of *exaggerated ease*, she knew exactly how to

treat him. She drew aside her dress so as to make room for him in a corner of the sofa upon which she was seated.

"Of course you don't want to dance?" she said. "This is one of the few London rooms that are fit to dance in; but to-night there is far too much of a squash. Are you coming to their little dance on the seventeenth?"

"No, I don't think so," answered Schneider, hesitatingly; for, indeed, he feared that he would have the best of all reasons for being absent from that entertainment.

"Not good enough? Well, I must say I think it is rather too bad of you all. Your idea seems to be that society is bound to provide amusement for you, and yet you won't make the smallest sacrifice for the benefit of society. If the smart young men refuse to dance, balls can't be given."

“Oh, I don’t refuse to dance; only sometimes it’s pleasanter to sit still and talk—don’t you think so?” said Schneider, immensely delighted at being called a smart young man.

“Yes, but duty is very seldom pleasant; and you have duties, though you decline to recognise them. However, I won’t make you dance this evening. What an unfortunate business this is about the Duchess, isn’t it?”

Schneider, not having the faintest idea what duchess was alluded to, or what the unfortunate business was, wagged his head and looked solemn.

“Of course,” Lady Belvoir went on, “you think she has only herself to blame. That is what men always think; but it is very unfair and very untrue. The fact is that you scarcely ever hear the truth. Take *the case of Lady —*, for instance. I

know you won't allow that there can be any excuse for her, and I admit that she has made a fool of herself; yet, in reality, she has been a great deal more sinned against than sinning."

She went on for some time in this way, discussing the frailties of high personages, and the scandals connected with their names. Schneider did not know at all what she was talking about; but he was beyond measure pleased by her taking it for granted that he was conversant with all the tittle-tattle of her set, and he did not disclaim the severely critical attitude with which she chose to credit him.

"Really," she said at length, "we are not so black as we are painted. Why won't you," she continued, in almost pleading accents, "try to judge of us for yourself, instead of believing all you hear about us?"

"But I assure you I don't believe all I hear," protested Schneider, eagerly, and he thought he might venture to add: "At any rate, I shan't believe what I hear about *you* in future, Lady Belvoir."

"Oh, you don't expect to hear much good, then," she returned, laughing. "You haven't heard any from Lord Guise, at all events; I'm quite sure of that."

As an honest and ingenuous man, Schneider felt quite unable to say that he had; but he remarked with engaging gracefulness that he should always be deeply indebted to Lord Guise for the introduction with which he had been honoured that evening, and he joyfully accepted Lady Belvoir's invitation to call upon her any Sunday afternoon when he had nothing better to do.

This simple tale is only in part concerned *with the subjugation* of Schneider, which,

from that moment, was a foregone conclusion, and of which the details were perhaps more amusing to Lady Belvoir than they would be to the general reader. Of course he called upon her, and of course he dined with her when she asked him, and equally of course he became her abject slave. She had succeeded with much more recalcitrant victims than he, and what the secret of her success was the present narrator would never divulge, if he knew it, because the promulgation of such secrets cannot tend to the public advantage. To Dorothy Leslie, who thought Mr. Schneider vulgar, familiar, and generally objectionable, Lady Belvoir would vouchsafe to say neither how nor why she had added his scalp to her previous trophies.

"You are a great deal too particular," she declared. "If one only made oneself agreeable to nice men, one would live in

a desert. Poor little Schneider is no worse than his neighbours."

"I should have thought that he was a great deal worse than some of them," Dorothy would reply, and indeed she could never be induced to show ordinary courtesy to this unfortunate gentleman, who, for his part, did his best to conciliate her.

"I can't make that girl out," Schneider complained one day to Eustace Moreton, whom he occasionally met in Carlton House Terrace. "She comes down upon me like a sack of coals every time that I open my lips, and if I meet her out anywhere, she won't see me. Who is she to give herself such airs, I wonder?"

Mr. Moreton didn't know, and might add that he didn't care. He agreed, however, that she had a very disagreeable manner.

"She seems to make a point of being rude to Lady Belvoir's friends," he observed.

Miss Leslie, it is true, was apt to lose patience with those whom Lady Belvoir treated as friends, as well as with Lady Belvoir herself for so treating them; and this impatience of hers was a source of much amusement to the more experienced woman.

“You pay me a poor compliment by calling them fortune-hunters,” the latter would say. “I believe them, on the contrary, to be sincere and disinterested lovers—and I ought to know.”

Whatever they may have been, she took an immensity of pains to keep them in a state of servitude and good humour, and, considering how numerous they were, it was no small proof of her ability that she managed to prevent their visits from clashing. As for Schneider, notwithstanding his natural modesty, the conviction forced itself upon him that a beautiful, wealthy,

and nobly-born lady was in a fair way to become enamoured of him. No wonder the poor little man lost his head, and during the greater part of his waking hours hardly knew whether he was standing upon it or upon his heels.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF PERCY THOROLD

IN our country, and in the times in which we live, those who aspire to the position of rising young statesmen have not much leisure to devote to the realisation of other ideals while the session lasts, and Percy Thorold often congratulated himself that he had no other ideals to realise. Of the pleasures of society—supposing, for the sake of argument, that society has any pleasures—he had made a more or less public renunciation ; so that he now considered himself absolved from even answering invitations which his duties rendered it impossible to accept. One must, however, dine sometimes with official persons ;

and it was at the house of an official person that he was introduced to a middle-aged lady of benevolent aspect, whom he was requested to escort to the dining-room. That this lady's name chanced to be Leslie, did not at first cause him to connect her with the girl whom he had met at Lady Belvoir's, and with whom he had been so favourably impressed ; but after he had been sitting beside her for five or ten minutes and had made such conversation as can be made for the benefit of unknown middle-aged ladies, his flagging attention was aroused by her revealing her identity.

“ My daughter told me that she had had the pleasure of making your acquaintance a short time ago through her friend Lady Belvoir,” said she. “ Lady Belvoir now lives near us in the country, and my daughter has become very intimate with *her* of late. I am not quite sure,” she

added, hesitatingly, "whether I am right in allowing Dorothy to see so much of her."

The *naïveté* of this unspoken query rather tickled Percy. "Lady Belvoir is my cousin," he remarked, smiling.

"Oh, yes; I know that, and I didn't mean to say anything at all against her. Still, one may have cousins who are charming in a great many ways, and yet not exactly the best companions for young girls. Dorothy is altogether inexperienced, and as for me, I know nothing of the fashionable world nowadays. It is ages since I spent a season in London. Formerly," continued Mrs. Leslie, with a sigh, "if one had one or two good introductions, that was sufficient; but now everything seems to be so changed. A few old friends have been kind to us and have asked us out; only I can't help noticing that one meets some very odd people at

their houses — people whom one certainly wouldn't have met in my father's time."

"I really think you would have met Lady Belvoir in anybody's time," answered Percy.

"I won't answer for it that you would have approved of her, because that is a question of personal taste and opinion; but I am sure that your friends would have asked her to dinner. And may I venture to say that, if you wanted to shield your daughter from any danger of evil communications, you shouldn't have brought her to London at all?"

"Oh, but one must!" Mrs. Leslie returned. "One wouldn't be justified in locking one's children up, even if it were possible to do so. Besides, Dorothy has principles which ought to be a sufficient protection to her."

"Exactly so. That is why I hope that *she will get no harm from my cousin.*"

Mrs. Leslie, who had heard all about the engagement which had recently come to an end, thought this very magnanimous—and so, perhaps, it was ; because if Percy Thorold had said what he really thought of his cousin, he would have had to say that he considered her heartless, selfish, deceitful, and vain. Not wishing to commit himself to so candid an expression of opinion, he shifted the subject a little and led Mrs. Leslie on to tell him more about her daughter. This is a subject upon which the generality of mothers are willing enough to converse ; so that before the evening was over Percy had learnt a good deal which increased his original interest in the *débutante*. Having, as he believed, had his day, and being now a mere spectator of life in a social sense, he naturally felt interested in those who were about to take their turn at the game.

It is a pity that Mrs. Leslie knew so little about the stress of modern political life; otherwise she would doubtless have been more flattered than she was by the request of this overworked legislator that he might be permitted to call upon her. On the following Wednesday afternoon he made his appearance at the little house in Ebury Street which she had taken for the season, and not only found Mrs. and Miss Leslie at home, but landed in the middle of a tea-party, which was perhaps rather more than he had bargained for. However, there were not a great many people present, and the tea-table, over which Miss Leslie was presiding, was in the back drawing-room; so that, if he wished to talk to that young lady rather than to her mother, he had no reason to grumble at his luck.

“And does a London season come up to your expectations?” was the first thing

that he asked her, putting his question with an amiable, grandfatherly air. "I suppose you have been racketing about to a tremendous extent."

"Not to what you would call a tremendous extent," she answered. "We have been to very few balls, and those were rather disappointing, except as a spectacle. I have enjoyed the theatres and concerts, though; and I hope to enjoy a good many more before we return to our native obscurity."

"Ah, I wish I had time to go to concerts!" sighed Percy. "Music is about my only real pleasure now."

The girl glanced at him with a slight suspicion of irony in her smile; but, bearing in mind how lately he had been crossed in love, she felt that he was entitled to be a little lackadaisical, and only said.

"What about politics?"

"Well, they don't come under the head of pleasures, at all events. I gave you my views of political life the last time that I had the honour of meeting you, if you remember."

"Yes; and I remember that I made so bold as to tell you that I didn't believe in their sincerity. It is generally easy enough to tell whether people mean what they are saying or not."

"Is it, indeed? If I found it so, political life would be very much simplified in my case. I should like to take you to the House of Commons some time when one of half-a-dozen Members whom I could name is on his legs. Then, if you could tell me whether he meant what he was saying or not, you would do me a truly invaluable service."

"Oh, if they were clever and dishonest *men*, I dare say they would puzzle me.

But you are not—I mean you are not dishonest.”

Mr. Thorold bowed gravely.

“I want so much to hear a debate,” the girl went on presently. “Is that a very difficult thing to manage?”

“Not so difficult but that I dare say I could manage it for you by making an effort. Whom do you particularly wish to hear?”

“Would you be horrified if I said that I would rather hear Mr. Gladstone than anybody else?”

“Not in the least. I also would rather listen to him than to anybody else. That doesn’t compel me to agree with him.”

“And, next to Mr. Gladstone, I should like to hear you.”

“Thank you. I don’t shrink from the comparison, because none will be drawn. Nobody has ever dreamt of calling me a

brilliant speaker; all that can be said for me is that I am accurate and cool-headed."

"But those are two very important things, are they not?"

"They tell more or less in the House; they aren't of much use upon the platform. Well, you shall have an opportunity of hearing us both, and then you will be able to judge to some extent which style of oratory is likely to be the most serviceable under a system of party government. I suppose Mrs. Leslie will accompany you?"

"Yes, please; though I'm afraid she won't enjoy it. I asked Lady Belvoir to take me; but she said she would as soon listen to a two hours' sermon."

"Your mother," observed Percy, "has been asking me whether I considered Lady Belvoir a desirable sort of friend for you."

"And what did you say?"

"*I didn't say much; perhaps I am not*

a very good judge. I should be sorry if you were to adopt Lady Belvoir's standard of conduct; only I am quite sure that you won't."

"Are you quite sure that you know what her standard of conduct is?"

"Oh, dear, no; I don't even know that she has one. However, I know how she conducts herself."

So, for the matter of that, did Dorothy Leslie; but she was a loyal friend, and she would doubtless have found something plausible to urge on Lady Belvoir's behalf, had she not been interrupted by the entrance of fresh visitors. These were all of them young men, and, after the manner of their kind, they made short work of the mistress of the house, with whom they shook hands and whom they promptly deserted in favour of her daughter. Thus Percy Thorold found himself relegated to the background

— a position which has its theoretical advantages and its practical drawbacks. He left the house almost immediately, and as he walked away he was conscious of a certain feeling of irritation against those well-dressed and self-satisfied youths for which he was at a loss to account. What in the world did the cut of their clothes or their satisfaction therewith signify to him? Surely he could not be so ridiculous as to be jealous of them! Nevertheless, that is precisely what he was, and probably it was some inkling of the truth that caused him to say to himself in a very determined manner: “No, thank you! I’ve burnt my fingers once.”

But of course it does not follow that because you have quite made up your mind not to be so silly as to fall in love with a girl much younger than yourself (who, in *any case*, would be most unlikely to look

twice at you), you are therefore to be rude to her and ignore her innocent requests. Consequently, it was but a few days after this that Mrs. and Miss Leslie were enabled to look down upon the heads of those who are supposed to represent the concentrated wisdom of the nation, and heard a harangue from the leader of the Opposition which one of them thought magnificent. Mrs. Leslie, whose political opinions were of the true-blue order, remained unmoved by it. No amount of eloquence can make black white, and Demosthenes himself could not have persuaded her that it would be right to concede Home Rule to Ireland. It must be admitted that she knew nothing whatsoever of the arguments for or against that measure; but in this she only resembled the overwhelming majority of her fellow-countrymen; and really, if one had to be *perpetually* giving reasons for the beliefs

which one holds, there would be no time left to devote to the daily duties of life.

Dorothy, on the other hand, was open to conviction, and it was Mr. Thorold's privilege to convince her. He did not at once follow the great man. That task was undertaken by a more important personage ; and, truth to tell, the important personage made rather a mess of it. Other speakers on both sides of the House said what they had to say, without producing much impression, one way or the other, upon the critic in the Ladies' Gallery ; but very soon after Percy Thorold rose, she became aware that she was listening to a man whose words were worthy of attention. His description of himself as an orator had certainly been too modest. Brilliant he was not ; but he was fluent, he was refreshingly lucid, he could prove his facts, and such points as *he made were indisputable*. He was fre-

quently interrupted, and this did not disturb him at all. He had a way of waiting until the noise subsided and then calmly finishing his sentence which seemed to have a peculiarly exasperating effect upon his opponents. His speech, which was not a very long one, seemed to Dorothy almost, if not altogether, conclusive, and to its cool logic and unimpassioned exposure of mis-statements and fallacies she was inclined to attribute the substantial majority obtained by the Government. This may have been, and probably was, an error on her part; but it matters little enough whether she was right or wrong. What is really important, as regards this narrative, is that from that moment she conceived a sincere respect and admiration for one who may be called its hero, so far as it has a hero.

She had no immediate opportunity of letting him know how highly she thought

e

of his abilities as a debater, nor did she see or hear anything more of him for another ten days ; but one morning, when she was riding in the Park with Lady Belvoir, who had good-naturedly given her a mount, she was glad to recognise Mr Thorold among the other equestrians, and still more glad when he turned his horse round and joined them. Lady Belvoir being, as usual, surrounded by admirers, it naturally fell to Percy's lot to escort Miss Leslie, who had a little the appearance of having been shouldered aside by the throng.

"I liked your speech better than Mr. Gladstone's," she said at once, without any preface.

He looked very much surprised, but at the same time gratified. "Oh—but I'm afraid that's impossible," he answered.

"It can't be impossible, because it is *the fact*. I admit that he carried me away

for the time, but he didn't enlighten me in the least, whereas you did. And I prefer being enlightened to being carried away."

"Then you must be very unlike the generality of your sex," remarked Percy. "And indeed," he added, presently, "I think that in many ways you are."

This sounded a doubtful sort of compliment to pay in return for the handsome one which he had received, and it probably occurred to him that his words were open to misconstruction, for he hastened to explain that if Miss Leslie differed from the generality of women, that was only because she was apparently free from their defects. "The truth is, that I am something of a woman-hater," he said, laughing.

This avowal did not astonish Dorothy, who was aware that he had reasons for being what nobody whose mind is in a

perfectly healthy state ought to be. As, however, she could think of no consolatory rejoinder, she held her peace; and, before either of them could speak again, her attention was fully taken up by other and more pressing matters. The horse that she was riding was fresh, and perhaps rather too high-couraged for a lady who was not (as Lady Belvoir was) a finished horse-woman. Somebody cantering briskly past, caused him to break into a gallop, and Dorothy perceived that the situation was rapidly becoming critical.

Thorold saw it too, for he exclaimed: "Take care! Don't let him get out of your hand."

"He is out of my hand already," answered the girl, a little breathlessly; "I can't hold him."

Of all disagreeable places in which to *be bolted with*, Rotten Row is the most

disagreeable. You are very likely to get killed ; you are not at all unlikely to kill somebody else ; and, in any case, you are quite certain to incur universal censure for having allowed such a thing to happen to you. Fortunately for Dorothy Leslie, she was preserved on this occasion from breaking her own neck or from scattering death and destruction around her ; and, fortunately for Percy Thorold, he was the instrument of her preservation. There is not much use in catching hold of the bridle of a runaway horse ; but a strong arm may be of service when he has almost but not quite run away, and Percy was just in time to avert a catastrophe. However, he and his companion had galloped nearly as far as Kensington Gardens before they came to a standstill, and Lady Belvoir, who, as a matter of fact, was unaware of what had occurred, was nowhere to be seen. Dorothy

was for riding back and joining her; but to this Mr. Thorold would not consent.

"You must let me take you home," he said; "that horse is really a little bit too much for you. He won't break away with you in the streets; but I wouldn't answer for him here, and it isn't worth while to run risks."

"But won't Lady Belvoir be anxious?" suggested Dorothy, doubtfully.

"Well, no," he replied, with a slight smile, "I don't think so. She isn't a very anxious sort of person, you know; she will be sure to think that it is all right."

So Dorothy allowed him to escort her to Carlton House Terrace, and he complimented her upon the nerve which she had shown, and she thanked him for his timely aid, and in the course of the next twenty minutes a greater degree of *intimacy* sprang up between them than

would have been likely to result from as many chance meetings under more ordinary circumstances. They reached their destination without further mishap, and Dorothy had hardly dismounted when Lady Belvoir clattered up, attended by Eustace Moreton.

Lady Belvoir, as had been foreseen, had been disturbed by no anxiety about her charge. She laughed and remarked: "I thought we should find you here. I hope you have enjoyed your ride, both of you."

Dorothy gave a brief account of what had happened, which was listened to with some amusement, and even with a touch of apparent scepticism; but Percy thought it right to take his cousin aside for a moment and point out to her that it is really neither wise nor safe to assume that any girl can manage any horse. Such carelessness may have consequences for which no subsequent remorse can atone.

"Oh, my dear Percy," exclaimed Lady Belvoir, "how I should have detested you if I had married you! You have a gentle, temperate style of reproaching one for one's sins which reminds me of nothing so much as my first governess, who always used to assure me it gave her far more pain to box my ears than it could give me to have them boxed. However, I don't detest you now; I really quite like you. And Dorothy, shan't ride that horse any more; and by giving reasonable notice you may count upon always meeting her here when you do me the honour to call. Will you stay and lunch now?"

Percy declined this invitation, pleading the pressure of official duties; but the mere fact of its having been given sufficed to modify his views with regard to the sex of which he had so lately proclaimed himself *a hater*. Hence it may be inferred that

the love for Sybil Belvoir, which during many years had been an essential part of his existence, was now finally dead and buried.

CHAPTER V.

USELESS EUSTACE

LADY BELVOIR, like the generality of perfectly selfish people, was good-natured. So long as she got what she wanted, she was very willing that others also should get what they wanted. Indeed, she much preferred their doing so, because it is pleasanter to associate with contented than with discontented mortals. As for Percy Thorold, he was, perhaps, of all her captives the one of whom she was the least proud and whose allegiance she was the least anxious to retain. For one thing, he had wearied her to death ; for another, she was quite well aware that he had been in love, *not with her*, but with a girl of her name

who had long since ceased to exist ; finally, he had never for a moment succeeded in touching her heart. Consequently, her feeling towards him was one of simple friendliness, and as she knew him to be an excellent man in all respects (except those which she cared for), she was honestly pleased to discover that he was smitten with the only girl in the world whom she had ever found tolerable as a companion. She found various means of bringing them together, and amused herself, when she had nothing better to do, by watching the progress of their mutual relations. They were obviously falling in love with one another, but were just as obviously unconscious of it, so that their satisfaction in meetings which they had never arranged and their ill-concealed disappointment when, as sometimes happened, those meetings failed to come off, formed a pretty and refreshing

little idyll for a disenchanted woman of the world to contemplate at spare moments.

Lady Belvoir's spare moments, to be sure, were not numerous, for she had many irons in the fire, and these naturally required pretty constant attention; still she was not so self-engrossed but that she could occasionally devote a little time to the interests of an old and valued friend, and it is certain that at this period Percy Thorold's opinion of her underwent a marked change for the better. As the spring and summer went on, and as his engagement to and rupture with his cousin passed into the category of ancient history, he became a more and more frequent visitor in Carlton House Terrace. He was still by way of shunning the gay world, but perhaps his reasons for so doing were no longer the same as they had been earlier in the year. It is only quite young and quite *old men who go into society for society's*

sake : the others submit to it in order to meet somebody; and if that individual can be met just as easily and far more comfortably at afternoon tea, why should a busy politician neglect public affairs for the chance of a few hurried words in a crowded ball-room ?

But, of course, busy politicians cannot always count upon being free between five and six o'clock, and that is why Percy was unable to put in an appearance at Lady Belvoir's one afternoon, although he had previously given Miss Leslie to understand that he would be there.

"My dear girl," Lady Belvoir said, when her friend entered, "I am delighted to see you, but I'm afraid you won't see anybody except me to-day. I did ask Percy to look in, but I have just had a note from him to say that he is bound to be at Westminster."

"But really I don't want to see anybody

except you," Dorothy replied, with pardonable mendacity.

"Oh, well, if you are sure of that"—Lady Belvoir paused for a moment and laughed—"if you are sure of that," she resumed, presently, "I'll ring and order tea. All things considered, I don't know that I particularly care about seeing anybody except you, so I won't send you away."

These two women, who had so little in common, had by this time at any rate a considerable number of common acquaintances, and upon these their conversation not unnaturally turned. Thus justice, without very much mercy, was done to many persons who, by reason of the narrowness of the present stage, have not been introduced to the reader, as well as to one or two who have. Mr. Schneider, for example, if he had been concealed behind one of the numerous *screens which adorned the room*, would have

been forced to listen to certain truths about himself which could hardly have failed to make him unhappy, although he might have been to some extent consoled by hearing Lady Belvoir take his part.

“I don’t know why you are always so hard upon my poor little Schneider,” she said. “He isn’t clever, of course; but one can’t expect everybody to be clever.”

“No—only I don’t think he is a gentleman,” Dorothy replied.

“Has any one ever had the effrontery to assert that he was? What do you mean by a gentleman? I mean a person entitled to use coat-armour, and I don’t see what all the other elaborate definitions that one hears have to do with the subject. Schneider has just about as many ancestors, I suppose—a few more or a few less—as half the men whom I receive.”

“Very likely; but . . . was thinking of his

manners rather than of his birth ; and as for half the men whom you receive, I never can understand why you receive them."

The truth was that Dorothy could not enter into the good-humoured disdain with which Lady Belvoir regarded her suitors, one and all ; and as, rightly or wrongly, she thought better of her friend than most people thought, it provoked her to see the encouragement freely accorded to persons who had no right at all to expect anything of the kind. One of these was announced before Lady Belvoir had time to reply, and at the sound of his name Miss Leslie made a grimace. Mr. Eustace Moreton was probably entitled to the use of coat-armour, but that did not alter the fact that he was lazy, selfish and inefficient.

Now, if Dorothy disliked this young gentleman — as she did very cordially — he *had no great fancy* or admiration for her, and

although he did not go so far as to make a face at her, he allowed it to be plainly seen that he was both surprised and displeased to find her in the room. What business had he to be either the one or the other? That was what Dorothy wondered, and what Lady Belvoir could have told her.

But Lady Belvoir only laughed a little, as though tickled by some thought of her own, and said to the new comer :

“ You have arrived just in time to stand up for yourself. Miss Leslie has been telling me that she can't understand why I admit half the men who come here. Does that include you, do you suppose ; or do you belong to the other half ? ”

Moreton had the manners of the modern young man, which, with all due respect to the modern young man, is tantamount to saying that his manners might have been more refined and urbane without any detri-

ment to his general attractiveness. He sank into a low chair, felt for the moustache which he had recently sacrificed, and allowed some seconds to elapse before he answered :

"I don't know, I'm sure, but I should have thought Miss Leslie might as well have condemned the whole of us while she was at it. It's very evident that we haven't had the good luck to please her, but perhaps that is because we haven't tried as hard as we ought to have done."

At this Lady Belvoir laughed again. "Suppose you begin now?" she suggested. "I shall be happy to retire to the other end of the room, if you think you would get on better without me."

"I don't think we should get on at all better without you," answered Dorothy and Moreton in one breath.

It was a pity that, after so emphatic a *concurrence* of opinion, they should have

been forced to do without her ; but at this moment two other visitors made their appearance, and so it came to pass that Dorothy and Mr. Moreton, being left sitting side by side, had to entertain one another, whether they liked it or not. Neither of them liked it at all, and Dorothy did not even make an effort to do her duty, so that it devolved upon her neighbour to open the proceedings. This he did by observing in a somewhat aggrieved tone :

“ I didn’t know that Lady Belvoir had a tea-fight on this afternoon.”

“ I don’t think she expected anybody to come,” answered Dorothy, coldly. “ Not even you, perhaps.”

“ H’m ! If it isn’t an impertinent question, may I ask whether she expected *you* ? ”

Impertinent or not, he obtained no answer to it ; but presently Dorothy observed : “ I wonder at your not liking tea-parties.”

"Do I," inquired Moreton, more in sorrow than in anger, "look like a man who enjoys tea-parties?"

"Yes, I think so," replied the girl, imperturbably. "Besides, if you don't enjoy tea-parties, what do you enjoy?"

Moreton very seldom lost his temper, but then it was not often that he was tried in this way. He was now thoroughly angry, and if Dorothy had been a man she would doubtless have been requested in a peremptory manner to explain her words. As it was, he only remarked, with studied calmness:

"I suppose that means that you look upon me as a very effeminate sort of person. I am sorry for that; but I don't think I'll try to alter your opinion."

"I don't think you could," returned his implacable antagonist.

The young man stared at her in undisguised astonishment.

"I know you don't like me, Miss Leslie," said he, "and, if you'll excuse my speaking the truth, I don't very much care. But, as a simple matter of curiosity, may I ask you what your quarrel with me is?"

"Yes," she replied, "you may, and I will tell you. My quarrel with you is that you are good for nothing. I may be wrong, but it always seems to me that a good-for-nothing man is ten times worse than a good-for-nothing woman. It is sufficient for a woman to *be* something—pretty, for instance—but a man ought to be able to *do* something. If he can't, he might as well never have been born."

"Oh, but I can do several things," Mr. Moreton replied, composedly. "I can dance very well, and I can shoot rather better than pretty well, and—let me see, is there anything else? Oh, yes; I forgot my chief accomplishment. I am a really first-rate

hand at ingratiating myself with ladies. Not with you, of course; but you are the exception that proves the rule."

If he meant to be exasperating, he scored a success, for Dorothy jerked up her shoulders, without deigning to respond, and after that he could get no more out of her. That she had not revealed the true cause of her hostility to him, he could hardly be expected to divine. How could he know that she suspected him of an ambition to acquire Lady Belvoir's fortune, and that she was convinced that Lady Belvoir, minus her fortune, would have had no sort of fascination for him? As little could she guess what was in reality the sad plight of this hardened student of feminine nature. For Eustace Moreton Lady Belvoir's reputation had no secrets; he knew all that was said about her, and believed most of it. Yet it was now *nearly a month* since he had become as wax

in Lady Belvoir's hands. That all-powerful woman had turned her attention to him the moment that she discovered how lightly he valued it, and such feeble resistance as he had offered had been overcome with ridiculous ease. It may be conceded that Eustace Moreton was a selfish man; but it is certain that the persistency with which he had followed Lady Belvoir about of late was not due to any wish on his part to make what is usually called a good marriage. He called himself an ass for acting as he did, and he knew that he was an ass; but he did it, all the same.

Dorothy, for the reasons which have already been mentioned, determined to sit him out upon this occasion, and it need scarcely be added that she attained her purpose. He stayed until the other people had gone away; after which he glanced appealingly at Lady Belvoir and impatiently

at Dorothy; but as neither of them chose to understand what he wanted, he resigned himself to the inevitable and took his leave.

"Poor fellow!" laughed Lady Belvoir, when she and her friend were once more alone.

"He is indeed!" agreed Dorothy, with fervour. "I don't think I ever in my life met with a poorer fellow."

"Oh, I have," said Lady Belvoir, throwing herself back in her chair and fanning herself lazily; "I have met with lots of poorer creatures. If you come to that, Schneider is a poorer creature. The mistake you make, my dear girl, is in asking too much of human nature. I am far more reasonable. The first thing that I ask of a man is that he should adore me; then I expect him to keep his temper with *me*; finally, I should like him, if he can

manage it, to amuse me. But I don't insist upon that."

"And does Mr. Useless Mortal fulfil all those conditions?" inquired Dorothy, scornfully.

"Mr. Useless Mortal, as you so wittily call him—by the way, Dorothy, I wouldn't display wit if I were you; it isn't a popular quality—is all that I could wish him to be. He behaved admirably this afternoon; because I did tell him that I should be at home and alone, and of course he must have thought that I had purposely misled him. When I think of the fuss that Percy Thorold used to make when these unavoidable accidents occurred!"

"Mr. Thorold was engaged to you," observed Dorothy, reddening a little, though there was no ostensible cause for her doing so.

"Yes, for a time he was; but he fussed

long before he was engaged. Mr. Moreton, I am sure, would never be fussy and never try to interfere with one's arrangements. A pleasanter man to marry I can't imagine, and I really quite regret that it is impossible for me to marry him."

"I am delighted to hear you say so," Dorothy declared.

"Thanks very much. Would you prefer my marrying your friend Schneider, then?"

"Of the two, I think I should," answered Dorothy. "Mr. Schneider, at least, is rich enough to be disinterested."


"You almost make me wish to convince you that the other is disinterested too. But perhaps it wouldn't be worth while. Taking everything into consideration, I think I will leave matrimony to you, my dear. You are better fitted for domestic joys than I am, and Percy oh, I beg *your pardon*; I didn't mean to say that."

"I don't know what you were going to say," declared Dorothy, with a good deal of dignity.

"Of course you don't. Well, I was only going to say that Percy also is fitted for domestic joys. Possibly he may have told you so himself by this time."

CHAPTER VI.

THREE UNFORTUNATES

O be a convinced pessimist it is before all things necessary to have reached middle age and to suffer from a disordered liver. Deprived of these two essentials, a man will be very apt to find nature too strong for him and to form a more flattering opinion of this world and its inhabitants than perhaps he ought to form. An unfortunate love affair is all very well so long as the soreness lasts; but this invariably wears off sooner or later, and then a reaction takes place in the minds of the young and healthy which cannot but prove fatal to their wisdom *and philosophy*. Thus, in the course of the

summer with which this narrative is concerned, it came to pass that Percy Thorold, who was still young, who did not so much as know that he possessed a liver, and whose love for his cousin had become a mere memory, began to think that there were good, and even adorable, women in London, notwithstanding the excellent reasons that he had for believing the contrary. At all events, he thought that there was one such woman, and it is obvious that when you have gone the length of making that admission there is an end of your pessimism.

Paramount as were the claims of public affairs upon his attention, he had nevertheless found time during those summer months to see a great deal of Dorothy Leslie, and the more he had seen of her the more he had learnt to appreciate her immeasurable superiority to the rest of her

•

sex. After all, there must be a few exceptions even to the most stringent of rules; and here, surely, was one of them. He was still willing to maintain that women in general are false, fickle, and foolish. Now, as regarded this bright and rare example of what all women ought to be, but unfortunately are not, there was one thing specially noticeable about her; namely, that although she might, if she had chosen to give them any encouragement, have had a very respectable number of admirers, she did not seem to care in the least for admiration. What made her so delightful was that you could talk to her as to a reasonable being. When she spoke of art or music or politics or any other subject in which you and she were jointly interested, you might feel sure that she had no *arrière pensée*—that she was not merely leading you on with a view to *putting you in a good humour* and so

acquiring a firm basis for the opening of those siege operations which rich men soon learn to recognise and dread. It was, in short, perfectly clear that she neither expected nor wished you to make love to her.

Not that these sage and just reflections prevented Percy from making love to her—quite the contrary. There are a thousand different ways of making love; and his, if a quiet and undemonstrative one, was no whit less effectual and effective than the others. At what period of their acquaintanceship it first dawned upon him that the feelings which he entertained for Miss Leslie were not precisely those of a father he could not afterwards remember; nor indeed was this a question of any importance. It was sufficient for him to know that life would no longer be endurable for him without her, and it was very pleasant

to him to suspect that when he should tell her as much—which he fully intended to do before the end of the season and the session — she would not be altogether displeased. But there is no rose without a thorn, and a very annoying little thorn (if indeed it could be called a little one) was provided for Percy Thorold in the memory of that fell compact to which Lord Guise had persuaded him to become a party some months back. He was very angry with Lord Guise when he thought of it and still more angry with himself. Of course there was no getting out of the absurd agreement ; he had pledged his word of honour, and he must do what he had undertaken to do. Still the idea of submitting Dorothy Leslie's name for approval to three such men as Guise, Moreton, and Schneider was horribly distasteful to him, and his inclination was *to put off the bad quarter of an hour as*

long as possible. Of the disapproval of these gentlemen he did not feel much afraid. In the first place, they would hardly, he presumed, have the impertinence to object to Miss Leslie ; in the second place, they were but slightly acquainted with her ; thirdly and lastly, he was prepared, by way of a bribe, to accord to them his full and free permission to marry any three ladies upon the face of the earth whom it might please them to select. What he did not like at all was the prospect of hearing his own selection discussed, however cursorily, and this deterred him from summoning a meeting which, in good faith, he ought to have summoned as soon as his intentions became clear to him.

It was not until the month of July that he was somewhat rudely awakened to a sense of his duty. By that time his devotion to Miss Leslie had been very generally

remarked upon. and Miss Leslie's mother, for one, was beginning to think that if he meant anything he had better say so. Mrs. Leslie was not a worldly woman, and was in no great hurry to see her only daughter married; but she thought that Dorothy ought to have the chances to which all girls are entitled, and it stands to reason that those chances must be diminished by the conspicuous and apparently welcome attentions of one man. She therefore took an opportunity of saying to Mr. Thorold:

"I hope you won't be too busy to come and say good-bye before we leave. We shall be going home in less than a week now."

It was at one of the last big official receptions of the year that this communication was made to Percy, who was a good deal disconcerted by it. Although he had of late been so constantly in Dorothy's society,

their meetings had for the most part taken place under the benevolent auspices of Lady Belvoir, and his interviews with Mrs. Leslie had been few and far between. A certain anxious look in the good lady's eyes made her meaning tolerably plain to him, and indeed he felt that her anxiety was justifiable. Well, it should soon be set at rest; but of course he must now lose no time about taking Guise and the other men into his confidence. He told Mrs. Leslie how very sorry he was to hear of her imminent departure and promised that he would call in Ebury Street in a day or two; after which, he moved away in search of Lord Guise, of whose red beard he had caught a glimpse earlier in the evening.

But Lord Guise, when discovered, was standing with his back against the wall, propounding original solutions of the Irish difficulty to a knot of amused politicians,

and it was evident that there was for the present no chance of obtaining his undivided attention. Percy, therefore, passed on in quest of somebody else, whose undivided attention he was fortunate enough to secure ere long. Miss Leslie, when he joined her, was one of a group of three or four persons ; but these slipped away, one by one, immediately after his approach, and he could not help remarking that a similar phenomenon had occurred under similar circumstances more than once of late. He had no objection to its occurrence ; only it certainly seemed to show that his courtship had lasted long enough.

“ I have just been horrified to hear from Mrs. Leslie that you are going away,” he began.

“ I shouldn’t have thought that that was such a very horrifying piece of news,” said Dorothy, laughing. “ Most people do leave *London* in July, don’t they ? ”

"Yes, unless they have the bad luck to be members of Parliament. But I didn't realise, somehow, that the end was so near. Shall you be sorry to go?"

"I shall be sorry for some things," answered the girl. "It has been very pleasant, and people have been very kind to us. Oh, yes; I shall be sorry."

"I wonder whether you will be half as sorry as I shall be!"

To this it was obviously impossible that Dorothy should make any reply; for how could she gauge the depth of Mr. Thorold's probable sorrow? Consequently she held her peace, and he went on to tell her how dreadfully he would miss her, how empty London would seem after her departure, how he would hate the remainder of the long, weary session, and a good deal more to the like effect. Perhaps her silence led him on to say rather more than he ought

to have said without going farther still ; but as it seems likely that the majority of those who will read these pages have been in love once in their lives, some clemency will doubtless be displayed in their judgment of him. He could not propose to her there and then, by reason of that ridiculous pledge ; but in a few days at the outside he would be free to declare himself, and he was naturally eager in the meantime to find out, if he could, what answer he would receive to his declaration. It cannot be said that a quarter of an hour of investigation brought him to the point of actual certainty ; yet at the expiration of that interval he was in high spirits, and since he took away with him one of the flowers which Dorothy had been wearing in the front of her dress, it may be assumed that he had no reason to despond. Before wishing her good night he had ascertained that she would be at home on the

following Wednesday and that she did not expect any other visitors on that afternoon.

Meanwhile, he was not the only person who, at the same time and place, had reluctantly determined to convene an early meeting of the Anti-matrimonial League. Lady Belvoir, magnificent in emeralds and diamonds, was present at this reception, and Lady Belvoir, like Mrs. Leslie and other less notable personages, was about to withdraw the light of her countenance from London. She said so to many of those with whom she conversed, and amongst others to Eustace Moreton, who of late had dogged her footsteps wherever she went.

"I knew you would be off before long," he sighed. "Well, tell me what day you mean to start, and I will order the funeral."

"Whose funeral?" she asked, wonderingly. "Not mine, I hope?"

"No; mine. I'm going to cut my throat.

Did you ever happen to set eyes on a man who was utterly and quite seriously in despair? If not, it might interest you to take a look at me ; because that is what I am."

Lady Belvoir availed herself of this permission; and there was a great deal more of tenderness and compassion than of wonderment in her gaze.

"Poor boy!" she exclaimed, "this is what comes of fancying oneself a cynic before one's beard is well grown. It serves you right ; and yet I am sorry for you. What woman has been treating you so cruelly?"

"As if you didn't know!"

"How can I know if you won't tell me?" Lady Belvoir asked, with a slight smile. "Come—who is she?"

"I can't tell you," answered Moreton, mindful of his obligations. "At least, I can't tell you now, and I don't think I ever will. *It wouldn't be of the slightest use.* She

is a great lady and a great beauty; there's no harm in my admitting that much. Well, you know what I am — an impecunious nobody. Of course, she would laugh in my face if I had the audacity to tell her that I loved her. Added to which, she has only been amusing herself with me; she doesn't really care two straws whether I cut my throat or not."

"Great ladies and great beauties," remarked Lady Belvoir, pensively, "are not always so inhuman as they are thought to be by young cynics. Am I a great lady? Well, I suppose I am, and I have been told that I am not altogether plain. In fact, you yourself have told me so, I believe. Yet I am sure that you would never think of calling me hard-hearted."

Moreton knitted his brows and looked at her suspiciously. "Are you laughing at me?" he asked.

“What is there to laugh at? Come and see me some day before I go away—you shan’t meet Miss Leslie this time—and I will show you that at any rate I am not too hard-hearted to feel for a friend in distress. Perhaps also,” she added, “I might be able to give you some information and advice about this mysterious flame of yours, if only you could make up your mind to let me hear her name. Women do sometimes fall in love, you know, and when they do, they are capable of any folly.”

“Lady Belvoir,” exclaimed Moreton, eagerly, “suppose—just by way of an instance, you know—suppose you were the woman, and the man was some fellow like myself, without money or position or anything, would you, do you think—could you——?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she answered, *laughing, as she turned away*; “so much

would depend upon the man, you see. But I will tell you this: I could never care for a man who was afraid to confess that he cared for me."

Alas! when a man is in love, what does it avail him to know that the woman whom he loves is a desperate flirt and has had a hundred desperate flirtations? Moreton's heart beat high with hope as he made his way through the rooms, seeking for Lord Guise, who had long before this had enough of it and had gone off to his club. Instead of meeting the chief conspirator, he encountered Thorold, who said: "Have you seen Guise anywhere? I want to speak to him rather particularly."

"So do I," replied Moreton.

Then both men started and looked each other in the eyes for a moment and turned away in a somewhat shamefaced fashion. Each of them, however, subse-

quently took comfort from the thought that if there was another fool in the case, there would be one less person entitled to make pointless jests at his expense.

If they had but known it—and really it was a little odd that Moreton did not know it—a third member of their small confederation was similarly incapacitated. To be invited to a huge Ministerial function was no great honour for Mr. Schneider in those days, although such an invitation would have made him quite proud and happy the year before; but what caused him to exult beyond measure upon this occasion was the marked civility and friendliness shown to him by more than one member of the existing Government. To be sure, there was a reason for this, and a tolerably good one. Mr. Schneider and his friends had recently come to the conclusion that a man *of his means* ought to be in Parliament, and

it had been represented to him that the surest way of eventually gratifying that legitimate ambition would be to contest a seat which had just fallen vacant in Scotland. There was little or no chance of wresting this seat from the Radicals; but it was thought that their majority might be reduced, which would produce a good effect, and, of course, any one who should undertake this forlorn hope would establish a strong claim upon the good offices of his party. Mr. Schneider, therefore, courageously threw himself into the breach, and was very properly complimented on his pluck by right honourable noblemen and gentlemen.

“I only wish there were more Conservatives who took your view of their duty to the party and the country, Mr. Schneider.” a very great man said to him that evening; and Schneider replied, with no less truth than *felicity*, that such words more than

rewarded him for the labour of fighting an uphill battle.

And no doubt it was natural enough that, seeing so many kindly and encouraging faces around him, and hearing so many pleasant things said of him, Mr. Schneider should have felt that he was sailing on the top of the tide towards that fair haven upon which his eyes had for some time past been longingly fixed. "Mr. Schneider and Sybil Countess of Belvoir entertained at dinner last night the Prime Minister, the French, German, and Russian Ambassadors, the Duke and Duchess of Paddington, etc." Oh, rapturous vision! What remained but to ascertain the views of Sybil Countess of Belvoir with regard to its fulfilment? Then this ardent wooer recollected, as others had done, that there was one trifling obstacle to be surmounted *before her ladyship could be approached*

with a direct offer ; but the recollection did not distress him as much as it had distressed the others , because, to begin with, he was under no apprehension of being laughed at, and besides, he did not think it at all likely that he would be interfered with. Moreton might possibly vote against him, Moreton being one of those conceited fellows who cannot stand being snubbed by ladies who fail to appreciate their fascinations ; but as for Lord Guise and Mr. Thorold, they would surely be forced to admit the suitability of the match. Rank on the one side, wealth on the other—what more would you have ? There was no question of sentimentality about the business.

It so chanced that he was able to do no more than exchange a few hasty words with Lady Belvoir until just as she was leaving, when she passed him at the top of the staircase with a smile and a familiar little

nod. But after she had descended a few steps she paused and glanced back at him over her shoulder. "By the way," she said, "will one see you again? I am off for the country, you know."

"Indeed I did not know it," answered Schneider, in dismay. "You don't start immediately, I hope. When may I call upon you? When shall I find you at liberty? I—I have so many things that I want to say to you!"


"So many as that? Wednesday, about six o'clock, then; but don't be later, or you may not have time to say them all before somebody else comes in. Good night."

There was perhaps a shade of mockery in her tone; but what did that matter when her eyes expressed nothing but the tenderest kindness? Schneider watched her tall, graceful figure until it disappeared, and *felt that he was indeed a happy man.* It

was a'l very well to tell Lord Guise and other heartless worldlings that he was desirous of marrying her for the sake of her social position ; but to himself he could admit the existence of a less discreditable reason than that. Lady Belvoir would probably have been quite touched if his thoughts could have been revealed to her.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SOCIETY PROTECTS ITS MEMBERS

N the next morning but one after the events chronicled in the last chapter Lord Guise received three letters by the same post, which afforded him prodigious amusement. The first of them that he opened was from Percy Thorold, and ran as follows :

“MY DEAR GUISE,

“I dare say you haven't forgotten that, one evening after dinner, you induced me and two other idiots to join what I think you called a Bachelors' Mutual Aid *and Protection* Society, and that we bound

ourselves to abstain from proposing to any woman until we should have received one another's permission to do so. How I can have been so silly as to fetter myself in such a way I cannot imagine; but having given my word, of course I must keep it, and since I am now thinking of marrying—or at least of asking a lady to marry me—I must beg you to let me know when I can meet you and the other two victims. Please, let it be to-morrow, if possible, as I am much pressed for time, and for Heaven's sake let the discussion be a short one! I am sure you will understand how very disagreeable this tomfoolery is to me under the circumstances.

“Ever yours,

“PERCY THOROLD.”

Eustace Moreton's note was even more concise :

"DEAR GUISE,

"I couldn't find you last night to tell you that I want a meeting of that blessed Anti-marriage club of yours summoned at once. I'm going to offer my heart and hand to somebody, if you'll kindly allow me. I'll tell you all about it when we meet, and I hope none of you will be ill-conditioned enough to put spokes in my wheel. After all, it's nobody's business but my own.

"Yours in haste,

"EUSTACE MORETON."

Mr. Schneider wrote at greater length and in more carefully chosen language; and this was what he had to say for himself:

"MY DEAR LORD GUISE,

"When I joined you and our friends, Thorold and Moreton, some months ago, *in an agreement* that we would none of us

offer marriage to a lady without previously submitting her name for approval to the other members of our society, I did not, I confess, think that I should be the first to claim the requisite permission and authority. Fate, however, has decreed that it should be so, and I feel sure that I may count, at least, upon your sanction. You may have your own opinion of the lady in question, and it may not be all that I (who am possibly a little better acquainted with her) could wish it to be; yet it would hardly, I think, be consistent with the views which I have heard you express, were you to oppose a union recommended chiefly, if not solely, by considerations of worldly prudence and advantage. I will not say more upon this subject now, as I hope to have an early opportunity of laying my case before you all.

“My time, as you know, is very much

occupied at present, and I may at almost any moment be compelled to go north. I am therefore *most anxious* to bring this matter to an issue as soon as possible, and if you could make it suit your convenience and that of our friends to meet me in the course of to-morrow I should feel greatly obliged.

“ Believe me, my dear Lord Guise,

“ Very truly yours,

“ J. SCHNEIDER.”

If there was one of these missives which made Lord Guise laugh more than another, it was the last. Upon what ladies the choice of Thorold and Moreton had respectively fallen he did not know, though he had suspicions with regard to Moreton; but as to Mr. Schneider's selection he was in no uncertainty, and the solemnity of that gentleman's style delighted him.

“ I was sure from the first that there was no frivolity about Schneider,” he muttered. “ The people who set him down as a fool will find out their mistake one of these days. What a magnificent M.P. he will make, and what a joke it will be if Sybil accepts him ! If I can only reconcile it with my conscience to vote for him I will certainly do so ; but I have a duty to perform, and I must not think selfishly of my own amusement.”

In any case, the approaching meeting seemed likely to be an amusing one, and Lord Guise at once despatched replies to his three correspondents, requesting them to dine with him that evening. His messenger speedily brought him back grateful acceptances of his invitations ; so that it only remained to give the necessary instructions to the housekeeper. Lord Guise, when in London, inhabited a few rooms in the somewhat gloomy family mansion in Piccadilly

which his father, who was an old man in failing health, seldom occupied. During the season he was supposed (the supposition was scarcely verified) to take the burden of entertainment off the ducal shoulders, and the services of the ducal *chef* were therefore placed at his disposition for three months out of the year. Consequently four gentlemen sat down in the spacious dining-room that evening to a dinner which only one of them appreciated. The other three were far too much preoccupied with their own thoughts to pay any heed to the fare set before them, and it cannot be said that their conversation was at all worth listening to.

As for their host, he behaved admirably, not a smile appearing upon his face, though every now and then he was shaken by an access of inward merriment. He exerted himself a good deal more than was his wont *to entertain his* guests and set them at their

ease, and he made no allusion whatever to the cause of their being where they were until after dinner, when he suggested that they should adjourn to his den in order to "discuss the business of the evening." As soon as this move had been effected and cigars and cooling drinks had been brought, Lord Guise seated himself at his writing-table, which gave him somewhat the air of presiding over a council of state, his three associates having been accommodated with arm-chairs facing him. He opened the proceedings in an easy, colloquial tone, yet in such a manner as to convey the idea that he regarded them as quite serious.

"Well, my dear fellows, you have called a meeting of our society, as you were bound to do, and here we are. I hope and think that you will have reason to congratulate yourselves eventually, if not immediately, upon the beneficent working of the system."

but of course the system can only be made to work by each one of us determining to do what he believes to be best for the other, without fear or favour. What I mean to say is that there must be no bargaining, no sort of tacit understanding, such as 'You vote for me and I'll vote for you.' Otherwise we shall quite defeat our own object. I wouldn't insult you by speaking in this way if I could feel that I was addressing men in their sober senses ; but as no less than three out of the four of us have avowed their intention of committing matrimony, I don't consider myself bound to apologise."

Lord Guise's three hearers looked both surprised and shamefaced. They had not exactly anticipated this announcement ; but two of them had certainly contemplated securing a majority by the underhand means suggested.

Their president, after surveying them

for a moment with serene benevolence, resumed :

“ I now beg to move that Mr. Schneider be heard first. Those who are in favour of the motion will kindly hold up their hands.”

Three hands, including Mr. Schneider's, were at once raised, and that gentleman was accordingly invited to state his case. This he did in terms to which no exception could be taken. He was not, he said, going to dispute the truth of the axiom which might be regarded as the foundation and *raison d'être* of their society, namely, that a man in love is thereby incapacitated from judging whether the object of his affections is a suitable wife for him. That might or might not be so, and he neither admitted nor denied that he was in love with the lady whom he desired to marry. He ventured, however, notwithstanding what had fallen from Lord Guise, to submit that he was in

full possession of his senses, and further, that the match which he had in contemplation could not be objected to by any fair-minded man.

“It is, if I may put things a little coarsely, a fair bargain. I have a good deal of money—I won’t claim any other advantage for myself—and Lady Belvoir has her title, as well as a social standing which——”

“Lady Belvoir!” interrupted Moreton, indignantly. “I never heard such cheek—I mean, I never heard of anything so preposterous in my life! You needn’t trouble yourself to say any more, my good fellow; I shall certainly vote against you. Why, you don’t suppose that your beastly money would be any temptation to her, do you? Hang it all! she might marry any man in England if she liked.”

Lord Guise had to remind the speaker

that his remarks were both intemperate and irrelevant.

"I don't care what they are," returned Moreton ; " I shall vote against him."

"And you, Thorold?" inquired Lord Guise, blandly.

Mr. Thorold confessed that he had not been prepared to hear of such a project as that which had just been made known to them. If he was to give his candid opinion and to dismiss all other considerations than that of Mr. Schneider's probable welfare from his mind, he was afraid he must say that it did not sound to him a promising one. At the same time, since there seemed to be a tolerably strong chance of Lady Belvoir's declining the offer made to her——

"Excuse me," interrupted Lord Guise ; "but that has nothing to do with your vote."

"Thorold," said Moreton, gravely, "it strikes me that you are hedging. You

aren't allowed to hedge; it's against the rules. If you don't think the match desirable, you must express your convictions by your vote."

Pressed in this way, Percy was reluctantly compelled to declare himself opposed to the scheme for which the sanction of the meeting was asked.

"That," observed Lord Guise, "constitutes a majority, and I need not say whether I approve or disapprove. It follows, in virtue of our agreement, that Schneider is debarred from holding verbal or written communication with Lady Belvoir for a period of six months from the present date. Sorry for your disappointment, Schneider; but there are many disappointments which prove to be blessings in disguise. Now, Moreton and Thorold, we are ready to hear you. Don't both speak at once."

The gentlemen named showed no dis-

position towards a display of unseemly haste. Each glanced interrogatively at the other, while the agonised protests of Schneider died away unheeded ; each looked thoroughly uncomfortable, and neither of them opened his lips.

At length Moreton said : " Well, I'm sure I don't care who speaks first. It's confoundedly unpleasant having to lay bare the secrets of one's heart to three grinning, unsympathising beggars like you ; but I suppose there's no help for it. I won't imitate Schneider by talking about bargains ; to my mind, there's nothing so utterly disgusting as making marriage a bargain. I honestly confess that I am over head and ears in love—I don't think I ever in all my life was so much in love — with Lady Belvoir."

" Oho ! " said Lord Guise.

" I don't know what you mean by ' Oho,' "

returned Moreton, who was in a somewhat irascible mood; "but I wish you would allow me to finish. After that, you may oho till you're black in the face if you like. I was going to say that my being in love with Lady Belvoir doesn't in the least blind me to her defects, so that it would be quite superfluous for any of you to point them out to me. Please to bear in mind that what you have to consider is whether it would make me happy to marry a woman who is this, that, and the other, *et cetera*; it isn't a question of whether you would be made happy by marrying her. You can't tell me anything about Lady Belvoir that I don't already know; and as for her failings—well, I prefer them to other people's virtues. Now then!"

Schneider, red in the face and a good deal perturbed, said, without a moment's hesitation, that he could not possibly vote *for his rival*. He had no ungenerous feeling

in the matter, he was personally willing to let any man take his chance ; but it seemed to him altogether absurd to suppose that Lady Belvoir and Mr. Moreton could live harmoniously together as man and wife.

“I should be sorry to make any confident prediction upon such a subject,” said Percy ; “but I own that Moreton’s way of stating his case strikes me as straightforward and promising. Upon the assumption that a man is deceived as to the character and disposition of the lady whom he loves, we might be justified in interfering on his behalf ; but Moreton tells us that he is acquainted with all Lady Belvoir’s faults, and that he likes them. That being so, I don’t see why I should drag him back by the coat-tails. I vote in favour of his being allowed to try his luck.”

“Leaving the responsibility of decision with me,” remarked Lord Guise. “Well, it

would ill become me to shrink from exercising my rights. Moreton, my dear fellow, you will have to go into exile for six months. I don't wish to harrow your feelings by saying what I think of Lady Belvoir; but it is sadly evident to me that if you like her peccadilloes now, you wouldn't like them after you were married to her. You must really think over the future in a more serious spirit before you commit yourself."

Eustace Moreton's rejoinder shall not be set down here, because it was couched in language much more vehement than he ought to have employed in addressing a friend who was cruel only to be kind. Lord Guise very properly took no notice of it, but merely said: "The case is disposed of. Next boy."

Percy Thorold cleared his voice, threw away the end of his cigar, and began:

"This much is certain, anyhow—not one

of you can pretend that he knows the girl whom I wish to make my wife as well as I do. With Lady Belvoir we are all pretty well acquainted, and besides, she may almost be called a public character. At all events, her sayings and doings are chronicled and freely commented upon in newspapers which everybody reads. But Miss Leslie, I am thankful to say, is quite unknown to the general public, and I trust that she may long remain so. If anybody here can find a word to say against her, he must be tolerably bold, or he must have sources of information which are not open to me. As a matter of fact, you have all three met her, and I don't see how you can very well have helped thinking her charming. Did you say anything, Moreton?"

"I'll say it again presently," answered Moreton, with a short laugh. "Go on."

"I don't know that I have anything

more to add," resumed Percy, a little disconcerted by this menace of incipient hostility. "I can't think that anything can be urged against Miss Leslie personally, and it is difficult to imagine what can be urged against my proposing to her—except, indeed, that I am not good enough for her. That I fully admit; only perhaps the option of replying to such a question might be granted to her."

"Oh, I've no doubt you're good enough for her," said Moreton; "but whether she is good enough for you, or for any man who wants to lead a peaceable life, is another matter. What do you think, Schneider?"

Now, Mr. Schneider had been not a little incensed by Thorold's adverse vote, which had appeared to him ill-natured and uncalled-for; in addition to which, he had *just as good reasons* as Moreton had for

disliking Dorothy. These he might have been magnanimous enough to overlook if the way in which he had been treated by the meeting had been such as to entitle any member of it to consideration at his hands ; but under all the circumstances, he felt himself quite free to say :

“ Well, since I am asked, and since I believe I am expected to be candid, I must own that I should be sorry to see a friend of mine married to Miss Leslie. In my humble opinion, she has a nasty, sarcastic sort of disposition, and I doubt whether she would make her husband's house a pleasant one to dine at.”

“ I'm quite with you there,” observed Moreton, with malicious complacency. “ Not to mince matters, I think she is a perfectly horrid girl.”

It has already been mentioned that Percy Thorold knew how to keep his

temper under provocation. He said, without any outward manifestation of the wrath that he felt :

“Of course I am very sorry that you should both have formed so mistaken an opinion of Miss Leslie; but I may venture to hope that time will modify it. Assuming, however, for the sake of argument that, if she accepted me, you would not accept a subsequent invitation to dinner from her, is that a sufficient reason for refusing me permission to consult my own tastes?”

“My good sir,” answered Moreton, who had no idea of granting to others what had been denied to himself, “it isn’t of the slightest use to reason with us. We don’t like Miss Leslie, we don’t approve of her, and we should never forgive ourselves if we were to let you marry her without taking *another* six months for reflection. I have

no doubt that I am expressing Schneider's sentiments as well as my own."

Mr. Schneider signified by a grave bow that such was the case.

"Then," said Lord Guise, "I am afraid there is nothing for it but to pass the usual sentence upon you, Thorold. The opinion of the majority is clearly against you, and the minority, if there is one, had better hold its peace. Now we have disposed of our business quite as harmoniously and expeditiously as could have been desired, and I trust we are all satisfied."

"Satisfied!" growled Moreton; "well—hardly. I can answer for one of us being thoroughly dissatisfied. What the deuce am I to do, I should like to know? It's all very fine to tell me in an off-hand way that I mustn't speak to Lady Belvoir for another six months; but it so happens that I have made an appointment with her.

and I believe she understands perfectly well why I made it. A nice sort of fellow she'll think me if I don't turn up and never send her a word of explanation!"

"That is precisely my own predicament," said Schneider, dolorously. "I too have made an appointment with Lady Belvoir, and I cannot help thinking that I am more to be pitied than Moreton, because I have reasons which he can scarcely have for hoping—however, I won't insist upon that. But I do think that some opportunity should be given us of offering excuses. It is bad enough that we should be forced to excuse ourselves at all; surely there is no occasion to make us behave like absolute cads into the bargain!"

"Really, Guise," said Thorold, "you must admit that that is a reasonable demand.

What possible excuses we shall be able to *make I don't know*; but we must be allowed

to say *something*. We can't simply absent ourselves without a word or a sign."

"Why not?" inquired Lord Guise, blandly.

"Because, my dear fellow—speaking for myself, and I dare say I may speak for my partners in misfortune—we are more or less committed. I suppose it isn't very usual for any man to propose to any woman without some preliminary sort of courtship, and for my own part, I certainly shouldn't do such a thing unless I had a fair hope of being accepted. You see what a mess one gets into when one attempts to put these nonsensical theories of yours into practice."

"I see," answered Lord Guise, "that you have got yourselves into a mess; but whose fault is that? You have all, I am sorry to find, broken the spirit of our agreement. You had no business to commit yourselves. Now, I don't know much about

Miss Leslie ; but what I do know is all in her favour, so that I shall be sincerely sorry if she is distressed by Thorold's apparent faithlessness. At the same time, it must be remembered that in six months from now he will be at liberty to explain matters fully to her, and if she has any real affection for him it ought to survive a separation of six months. As regards Lady Belvoir, I am as certain as I am of my own existence that she cares neither for Schneider nor for Moreton, nor for any other living being except herself, and as for remembering any man who absented himself from her for half a year, she simply couldn't do it. Therefore you need not feel the slightest uneasiness about her. She will be a little surprised when you fail to turn up ; but next week she will have clean forgotten you both—and a very good thing too ! Women like *Lady Belvoir* are one of the scourges of

civilisation. To a few men—of whom I happen to be one—they are not dangerous, and are consequently rather amusing than otherwise as a study; but to susceptible people like you they are worse than the plague, and the very best way for you to treat them is to run away from them. I heartily congratulate you upon being compelled to adopt that wise course."

This harangue, which was listened to with evident impatience, failed to produce any sedative effect upon the audience, amongst whom symptoms of mutiny were becoming apparent. Expression was given to these by Moreton, who said that, although he had pledged his honour as a gentleman to act in a certain way, if required to do so, he had never intended that pledge to apply to conduct unbecoming a gentleman, and that when one found oneself between the horns of a dilemma, one could but choose

to be impaled upon the least sharp of them. Lord Guise, therefore, thought it prudent to make a concession. One last interview, or one last letter might be permitted, he said ; but it must be distinctly understood that only one of either could be allowed. All three of the condemned accepted these terms, perceiving that they could hope for no better, and shortly afterwards Moreton and Schneider took their leave. Thorold lingered for a while with his host, not caring to walk away in the company of men who had shown themselves so gratuitously spiteful towards him.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PAINFUL PREDICAMENT

WHEN these two friends were left together Lord Guise threw himself back in his chair and laughed until the tears came into his eyes.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, "this is about the best joke I have ever heard of!"

"It may be," answered Percy, rather grimly, "though some people might think that it was a little spoilt by being so ill natured."

"Ill-natured! What do you mean? You look as if you meant me; but I hope you aren't so unjust as that. Is it my fault that three men over whose actions I have no control—except the limited control which

they have been so kind as to give me—have seen fit to play the fool at one and the same time? I suppose I may call that singular coincidence a joke without giving offence, may I not?”

“Yes; but what you are chuckling over is the way in which you have checkmated us all. I don’t deny that it is funny; only I don’t call it exactly friendly.”

“Thorold, you are very ungrateful. Much as I dislike matrimony in the abstract, I fully recognise the fact that well-to-do men with domestic proclivities are bound to marry, and if my voting for you would have done you any good you should have had my vote. To the best of my knowledge and belief, Miss Leslie is unexceptionable; but Moreton and Schneider, you see, think otherwise. I can’t help that.”

“And I have only myself to thank for *the absurd fix* that I am in? That is true

enough, I suppose; but at any rate I have to thank you for suggesting this foul project. What on earth made you do it?"

Lord Guise lighted a fresh cigar, tucked one leg under him and swung the other to and fro lazily.

"My dear fellow," he replied, "I will be perfectly candid with you. I confess that I started this society with a special as well as a general object, and I trust you won't think me unfriendly when I tell you that that special object was your welfare. You are so evidently a marrying man that I foresaw how easily you would be captured again, and I wished to protect you against widows and girls in their fourth season and other designing persons. I wasn't even quite certain that I might not have to protect you once more against Sybil Belvoir herself; for that woman is so capricious and so malignant that nobody except a hardened

philosopher, such as I am, can be considered safe from her."

"I only wish she would try her hand on you!" exclaimed Percy, who was not at all gratified by this avowal of a benevolent interest in his private affairs.

"I sincerely wish she would," answered Lord Guise, with a laugh; "that would keep her out of mischief for a time, and it wouldn't do me any harm. But you may depend upon it that she won't. She prefers to practise her arts upon an unfortunate wretch like Moreton, who had the audacity to imagine that he could resist her, or upon a millionaire like Schneider, whom she may have thought of marrying, *faute de mieux*. I wonder whether she would have married him! They say she has been outrunning the constable of late, you know."

"I don't know anything about it," *returned* Percy, impatiently; "it is no busi-

ness of mine, and why you should look upon it as your business I can't think."

"*Cælebs sum*," replied Lord Guise, sententially; "*nihil femineum a me alienum puto*. For the sake of my weaker brethren I feel it my duty to keep a watchful eye upon the ways and wiles of the other sex. Schneider will live to thank me with tears in his eyes."

"Possibly; and I dare say it is because I am more selfish than you that I don't care a little bit what becomes of Schneider. What I should like to know, if you could tell me—but of course you can't—is how I am to account to Miss Leslie for my extraordinary behaviour. As I fully intend asking her to be my wife in January next, I must manage to find some reason which won't sound hopelessly inadequate for taking no notice of her between now and then."

"That's easily done. Go to Persia, or

China, or Japan, or some such place. Parliament will be up in a week or two, and you won't be wanted again before February, so that you will be quite free to leave the country. Tell her you want to study the working of the Chinese constitution, or that you are anxious to pick up some specimens of ancient Japanese art before the last of them is sold."

"Yes," agreed Thorold, gloomily, "I suppose that is what I shall have to say. I should think there was very little chance of her believing me, though."

Lord Guise shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I dare say she won't quite believe you," he admitted; "but that, as I told you before, is entirely your own fault. You ought to have consulted us before you gave her to understand that you loved her."

Strictly speaking, Percy had not gone *quite so far as that*; still, he had gone far

enough to give his abrupt retreat a very ugly look, and it was with shame as well as grief in his heart that he set forth on the ensuing Wednesday afternoon to keep the appointment he had made with Miss Leslie. Now, in making that appointment, it had occurred to him that Mrs. Leslie would be terribly in his way, and he had wondered how he should contrive to get her out of the room just for a few minutes; but now he desired nothing more ardently than the presence of this third person, because, of course, what he had to say could be much more easily said to the two ladies together than to one of them alone. Surely, however, he might have known better than to imagine that no chance of speaking a private word to Dorothy would be given him. Mothers who give such chances are usually sneered at; yet how can the poor things help themselves? *W*

we ourselves were mothers, and if we had reason to suppose that a young man of large means and excellent character desired to say something particular to a daughter of ours, and if there was but one occasion left on which he could say it, what should we do? It seems exceedingly likely that we should act precisely as Mrs. Leslie acted, and arrange to have an old lady at tea with us on the arrival of the young man. The tea-table is in the back drawing-room; there is a folding screen between it and the arm-chair in which you have planted the old lady; you talk to your guest about her suppressed gout or some other topic of equally absorbing interest, and you grant the young man his opportunity without making it too disgracefully apparent that you are doing so.

So, when Percy Thorold made his appearance at the house in Ebury Street,

there, sure enough, was the requisite old woman, and five minutes afterwards he was seated beside Miss Leslie in comparative seclusion. Hard was his fate, and hard the task which he had to perform. It is a fact, and rather a melancholy one—but nobody will deny the fact—that love, more than any other of the passions to which we are subject, is increased by being thwarted. Never before had Dorothy seemed to him so charming; never before had he felt in the same degree the impossibility of saying even the most commonplace thing to her without letting her see how he adored her. He could not help noticing that her colour was a little brighter than usual, that her speech was somewhat quicker, and that there was a suspicion of nervousness in her manner. It was beyond a doubt that she had guessed the original object of his visit, and flesh and blood could hardly withstand

the temptation to give her a hint as to the true position of affairs. However, he was an honourable man, and he knew that he must not dally with that temptation. To place himself beyond reach of it, he said, rather suddenly :

“I suppose one won’t see you again for an age, Miss Leslie. I am thinking of betaking myself to the uttermost ends of the earth until Parliament reassembles.”

Well, she certainly looked surprised ; but perhaps it may not have been so much his announcement as the tremulous voice in which he made it that surprised her.

“What do you mean by the uttermost ends of the earth?” she inquired, smiling. “Not Westmoreland, I am afraid. That is where we shall be for a long time to come.”

“No,” he answered, sadly, “not Westmoreland. I had an idea of India and Japan *and San Francisco*. I shall hate the voyages

and the journeys, and indeed the whole thing from beginning to end ; but one comfort is that when it is over one will never be expected to do it again."

"Oh, I dare say you will enjoy it," she said, carelessly.

"I think not ; but it is the sort of thing that has to be done sooner or later. Everybody goes round the world nowadays," he pleaded, making his desire to excuse himself a trifle too obvious, "and—and I think I have rather knocked myself up with these night sittings, and no doubt I shall be all the better for a complete change, though the process may not be altogether pleasant while it lasts. And then, you know, there is one great advantage of going far away, which is the intense delight of returning to one's friends."

But of course he could not better his position by such speeches as that. Say what

he would, the facts remained that he had paid marked attention to this girl, that he had begged a flower from her on the occasion of their last meeting, and that he had made an appointment with her for the ostensible purpose of saying good-bye to her, and the unmistakable purpose of saying something else. Now, apparently, he had nothing to tell her except that he meant to run away, and that he was a good deal ashamed of running away. Whether she loved him or hated him or did not care a brass farthing about him, such conduct must inevitably strike her as contemptible. And that it did so strike her, the unfortunate man perceived plainly enough, although she said nothing worse to him than:

“I can’t imagine any delight being exactly ‘intense’ to you; you would always be thinking of the reverse side of the shield, *even though you couldn’t see it.*”

"Indeed you are quite wrong!" he protested, warmly. "Very likely I do keep rather too watchful an eye upon the seamy side of most things; but that only gives me a keener joy in the things which have no seamy side. And one of those things," he ventured to add, "would be a visit to Westmoreland. Will you be there the whole of next winter, do you think? In the month of January, for instance?"

"I really don't know; but we live there, and we don't often leave home," answered Dorothy.

"So that if I were to turn up at that time—if I happened to be staying for a few days with my cousin, Sybil Belvoir—I might hope to find you in the neighbourhood? I don't see why I shouldn't invite myself to stay with Sybil when I return," he continued, musingly. Then something that he saw in Dorothy's face prompted him to add: "She

and I are nothing more than friends and cousins now, and I am sure that she is quite as glad of that as I am."

Miss Leslie made no rejoinder; but presently she asked him whether he would have another cup of tea, and, on his declining, moved into the front room, whither he followed her perforce. The old lady, who may have had intelligence enough to surmise why her company had been desired, and why her room would now be more welcome, rose at once to depart, and after she had gone poor Percy had to pass through an uncomfortable five minutes. Mrs. Leslie was a simple, honest sort of woman, and as the news which her daughter imparted to her so calmly filled her with consternation, it was quite out of her power to conceal what she felt.

She said, "Oh, indeed!" and then *remained* absolutely silent while her visitor

explained somewhat confusedly that he required a change, and that it was the fashion to go round the world now, and so forth; but when he reached the point of saying that he should try to be in Westmoreland in six months' time, she could not refrain from giving him a tolerably direct snub.

"We do not see much of Lady Belvoir's friends," said she. "Lady Belvoir scarcely visits at all in the county, and I should not, in any case, care very much about that kind of society. Besides, I am not at all sure that we shall be at home in January. I should be glad to escape the long winter, and we may very possibly move south when the cold weather sets in."

"And if you do go south, where will you go?" asked Percy, who felt that he could not afford to accept a snub.

"That is quite uncertain. Dorothy, dear,

didn't you say that you wanted me to go to some shops with you? And do you see what the time is?"

After that, Percy could only take himself off as speedily as possible. Mrs. Leslie's method of showing displeasure was lacking in grace and dignity; but she had every right to be displeased, and he had none to resent the very chilling accents in which she bade him farewell. Dorothy, if less undisguisedly angry, was scarcely less cold; and the impression which he took away with him was that his chance of ever being forgiven was small indeed. Carlton House Terrace was perhaps rather an odd place to go in search of consolation; nevertheless, it was to Carlton House Terrace that he betook himself straightway. His cousin was the only person, except Lord Guise, to whom he could confide even a portion of his woes, *and he remembered that she had more than*

once displayed a good-natured sort of interest in this second love affair of his.

Lady Belvoir was at home, and the speech with which she received him was a welcome one to his ears, because it enabled him to plunge without preface into his subject.

"Have you come to ask for my blessing?" she inquired. "I heard that you were expected in Ebury Street this afternoon, and I am so extraordinarily clever that I can guess what errand took you there."

"You are very clever," he replied; "but, like other clever people, you sometimes make a bad shot. I went to Ebury Street to say good-bye. The fact is that I have made up my mind to take a trip round the world, and I suppose I shall hardly be back before the beginning of next year."

"Dear me!" said Lady Belvoir. "And what do you mean by that, pray?"

"Oh, I don't know; nothing in particular. I want to see Bombay, and Calcutta, and Yokohama, and—and all the other horrid places that people talk about."

"You look as if you did. And I wonder why you wanted to begin by seeing me; and I wonder what you think I can do for you; and I wonder whether Dorothy has refused you, or whether you only concluded, for some insufficient reason or other, that she would refuse you if you asked her?"

"Well, she hasn't refused me, and I haven't asked her, and I'm sure I don't know what the consequences of my asking her would have been," said Percy, laughing a little. "As to what you can do for me, I think that if you were very good-natured and kind, you might give me a general invitation to stay with you in Westmoreland when I return from this abominable trip."

"Consider yourself generally, not to say

particularly, invited," answered Lady Belvoir; "might a bewildered friend inquire once more what you mean by starting off on a trip which you call abominable?"

This was a very natural and excusable question; but of course it was not in Percy's power to make any reply to it. After a moment of hesitation, he said:

"I have reasons; but I am afraid I can't tell you anything about them, except that they aren't discreditable or dishonourable reasons."

"One is relieved to hear that," observed Lady Belvoir, with a twinkle in her eye. "One has acquired—quite against one's will—a certain knowledge of the ways of men which leads one to distrust even the best-behaved of them. However, my faith in you knows no bounds; so that I am willing to take your word for it that you are going away because you think you ought to see

Yokohama. The only thing is—do you really imagine that Dorothy Leslie is the kind of girl to wait meekly until you come back, and to drop a curtsy when you are graciously pleased to offer her your hand and what remains of your heart?”

“Ah, that’s just it! You know, Sybil, you have treated me rather badly, haven’t you?”

“So you have always said, and you are one of those people who are always right. How can I make amends? Shall we renew our engagement?”

“No, thank you; I shouldn’t like that; nor would you. But although you certainly did treat me badly, I don’t believe you are altogether heartless, Sybil.”

“This is indeed gross flattery!” exclaimed Lady Belvoir. “What *can* he be going to ask for?”

“Not for any very enormous favour.

What I was thinking was this: you may feel that you owe me a good turn, and it wouldn't give you a great deal of trouble to write to me once or twice while I am away. And couldn't you, perhaps, just put in a word for me sometimes, when you saw your opportunity? *Les absens ont toujours tort*, and, owing to circumstances which I can't at present explain, it will be impossible for me to say a word for myself."

"I see. I am to hold the fort for you, and I am to keep on repeating, 'He will return, I know him well.' But what if you don't return, my good friend? What if you meet with some enchanting creature on board one of the many steamers in which you will have to take a passage, and forget the poor maid of Westmoreland?"

"You know I shall not do that."

"Do I? If I do, it's all I know about your mysterious disappearance. Now, look

here, Percy, as I told you before. I have a childlike faith in you; I may say that you are the only perfectly honest man whom I have ever known. But if I undertake this job, it must be upon the distinct understanding that I am to be enlightened eventually as to the whole meaning of it. I rather think that I can smell a rat; still I am not sure; and I must be made sure, or I shall die of baffled curiosity."

"It will give me the greatest possible pleasure," answered Percy, gratefully, "to tell you all about it as soon as I am at liberty to do so. And do you think, Sybil—candidly now—do you think that there is any hope of my being pardoned? I don't mind confessing to you that I went rather farther than I ought to have done, and I know Mrs. Leslie is furious with me. One can't blame her."

"Oh, you goose!" exclaimed Lady

Belvoir, laughing, "what signifies Mrs. Leslie's fury? Don't you understand that if you want to be pardoned by a woman, all you have to do is to make her love you? After that, she will pardon anything and everything. More fool she, no doubt; but we are made like that."

"Are you made like that?" asked Percy, wonderingly.

"*Qui vivra verra.* Would you mind going away now? I am about to hold an interesting and affecting interview with a friend of yours who has been gnawing his nails with impatience in my boudoir for the last half-hour."

CHAPTER IX.

LADY BELVOIR SMELLS A RAT

LADY BELVOIR'S wits, which were as sharp as those of any woman in England, seldom led her to form false conclusions. Clear enough was it to her that her cousin's honourable intentions had been thwarted by some malignant meddler, and very little doubt had she that Lord Guise was the culprit in question. The only thing that she was puzzled to account for was Lord Guise's power to prevent any independent man and true lover from acting as he pleased. And what was the meaning of that six months' limit? One can imagine a fanatical opponent of matrimony urging his

friend to look for six months before leaping ; but one really cannot imagine his friend taking such advice. Lady Belvoir, therefore, was perplexed, though convinced that she was upon the scent ; and as perplexity was a condition of mind to which she was neither accustomed nor disposed to submit, she could not divert her thoughts from the unsolved problem when she passed slowly into her boudoir, where Mr. Schneider had been requested to await her.

Had she been less preoccupied, she might have taken more notice than she did of poor Schneider's nervous agony and the incoherence of his speech. As it was, she attributed these symptoms of distress to a not unnatural cause, and did not trouble herself to allay them. Let him flounder and stumble for a while ; it was only right that he should be to some extent conscious of his impudence. For, however much

one may belong to one's epoch and have emancipated oneself from worn-out aristocratic traditions, one is still aware of the existence of such a thing as breeding, and one cannot regard oneself as belonging to quite the same species as a little mongrel millionaire. One may, however, marry a mongrel for the sake of his millions, and Lady Belvoir had seriously thought of doing so. She was rather deeply in debt, she was living far beyond her income, she hated the notion of retrenchment, and there are worse things than a husband who is at once rich and submissive. She lay back in her luxurious arm-chair, fanning herself and contemplating with a certain languid amusement the stammering wretch before her, who looked uncomfortably hot and to whose words she scarcely listened.

"Shall I, or shall I not?" she was thinking. "Really I don't believe I can.

At any rate, not yet; he is too ridiculous. If the worst comes to the worst, he can always be sent for."

But while she was thus mentally disposing of him her attention was suddenly arrested by some phrase of which he made use and which had an odd sort of sound. What in the world was the man saying? "Business matters which have been too long neglected—absolutely necessary for me to look into my affairs and find out how I stand—doubtful whether I shall be able to see anything of my friends for some months to come." These were confused and equivocal statements, nor was the manner of their enunciation such as to inspire confidence in the sincerity of the speaker. "As I live," thought Lady Belvoir, in utter stupefaction, "the fellow is trying to back out of it!"

Never in all her experience had such

a thing as this occurred to her before, and she could hardly believe her ears. Instantly she forgot all about Percy Thorold and Lord Guise, all about her pecuniary embarrassments and the results to which they might lead, and devoted her whole intelligence to the study of this new and most extraordinary phenomenon. A mongrel millionaire showing anxiety to kick himself clear of Sybil, Lady Belvoir! This required looking into a great deal more than Mr. Schneider's affairs could possibly do.

The position of the luckless Schneider was, as every one must see, awkward and difficult in a degree far surpassing that of Percy Thorold. Percy, in deciding to absent himself for six months, had, in fact, adopted the only admissible course; when one is forbidden to speak to the woman whom one loves, there is absolutely nothing for it but to fly the country. But from this

course Schneider was debarred by various considerations, not the least important of which was his ambition to enter Parliament. The Scotch election he would no doubt lose; but were he to follow up his defeat by flight, he would forego any subsequent chance that might offer of repairing it, and would likewise be considered to have resigned all claim upon the indulgence of the wire-pullers. The commercial instincts which were his by right of heredity would not suffer him to make such a sacrifice as that. Yet, if he remained in England, how could he avoid meeting Lady Belvoir? And when he met her, how could he avoid addressing her? It was not as though she were one of those people who disappear at the end of one London season and are seen no more until the opening of the next. She was no less certain to be at Doncaster and Newmarket — not to mention other



places — than if she had been one of the stewards of the Jockey Club, and pretending not to see her would be as futile as pretending not to see the winning-post. In the grievous straits to which he was reduced, Schneider could hit upon only one pretext, which, feeble though it was, had just a shade of plausibility. It was quite true that his affairs demanded inspection. He was immensely rich, and his money was perfectly safe; but this he did not know by personal inquiry. He had hitherto been too busily engaged in climbing the social ladder to ascertain the exact whereabouts of his vast capital; and when a man is thinking of marrying, it surely behoves him to put things ship-shape. Might not Lady Belvoir be induced to understand and appreciate this delicacy? At all events, he must make the attempt, because he could perceive no *alternative* open to him. So this was what

he was saying when the drift of his remarks first dawned upon her :

“ The fact is, that I have been a little bit too careless and easy-going ; I’ve just drawn cheques when I wanted money, you know, and supposed it was all right. . But a time comes when one feels that there must be an end of that—that one ought to find out what means one has at one’s disposal, and—well, if it comes to that, what settlements one could make, in the event of one’s being called upon to make settlements. Situated as I am, the process is likely to be a longish one, and I shall have to devote all my attention to it ; so that I’m afraid I may not be able to see much of my friends for some months to come.”

This was the phrase which caused Lady Belvoir to prick up her ears. “ That is bad news for your friends,” she observed, suavely.

“Ah, I wish I could think so! I wish some of my friends would miss me a hundredth part as much as I shall miss them! But what I feel is that it’s inevitable. I’m awfully particular about these things. I don’t know whether you’ll understand what I mean; it’s a sort of—of honourable scrupulousness. So long as one can’t say just what one is worth, one is sailing, as it were, under false colours, don’t you see?”

“And when you have found out just what you are worth,” asked Lady Belvoir, with perfect gravity, “do you propose to have the sum engraved upon a silver plate and to hang it round your neck, like the label on an old-fashioned decanter? Or will you be satisfied with sending a paragraph to all the newspapers?”

“Ah, Lady Belvoir, you think I want *to swagger*. But it isn’t that—it isn’t

really! Only events might occur—I might, for instance, be thinking of marrying—that is, if I could dare to hope that I had any chance of being accepted. And then the lady would naturally wish to know what my fortune amounted to.”

“Oh, quite naturally; I should think it would be the first question she would ask.”

“And a nice sort of fool I should look if I had to answer that I didn’t know. So I have determined to go into the matter once for all, and, as I say, that will take rather a long time; and I think that while I am occupied in this way I had better retire from the world, so to speak.”

“Do you mean that you will go into a sort of retreat in the City?”

“Oh, no; one can’t very well disappear. One must see one’s horses run; and then there will be the shooting, and—and, in short, I don’t think I need cut myself off

from other men. Only perhaps it would be wiser—more straightforward, that is—to avoid the society of ladies for the next six months. Lady Belvoir, would you think it very odd if I asked you to take no notice of me—to behave as if you didn't know me, in fact—for the present?"

Schneider, as he put forward this remarkable demand, grew very red in the face; for he could not but be aware of the insufficiency of the reasons which he had adduced in support of it. He was therefore greatly relieved to hear that Lady Belvoir would not think it odd—not in the least odd.

"When is it that I am to be allowed to speak to you again?" she asked. "Did you say six months hence?"

"Yes; in January next I hope to be released from my—er—voluntary exile."

"Ah! And do you really imagine, Mr.

Schneider, that I believe one single word of what you have been telling me?"

The unhappy Schneider hung his head, and remained silent. Of course she didn't believe him; yet, since he could not reveal the truth, what was he to say?

She enjoyed his discomfiture for a few seconds before she resumed:

"Lord Guise is too clever by half; and you, my dear Mr. Schneider, are not quite clever enough. How did he contrive to extort that promise from you and Mr. Thorold?"

"Oh," exclaimed Schneider, with just indignation, "if Thorold has been betraying us——"

"But he hasn't; you betrayed yourself. It was that specified period of six months that enlightened me; and my mentioning Lord Guise was only a shot — which, I see, was a good one. And now, as

I know so much, you may as well tell me all."

"Don't ask me," pleaded Schneider, piteously; "I have let out a great deal more than I ought to have done. I am bound by a pledge which I rashly took long before I—— But really I have no business to be saying this."

"A pledge to abstain for six months from speaking to the lady who you hardly dare to hope will accept you, and who is likely to be so keen about settlements?"

"Oh, not any particular lady," began Schneider, and then checked himself. "I'm afraid I mustn't answer questions," he said, with an appealing look.

It is certain, however, that he would have been made to answer just as many questions as Lady Belvoir chose to put to him if he had not been saved from disgracing himself *farther* by the entrance of Eustace Moreton,

who was announced at this moment. The two men exchanged distrustful glances, and Schneider, willing enough to be dislodged from a position which had become almost untenable, hastened to bid his hostess good-bye. He accompanied his farewell by a look full of meaning, in response to which she smiled graciously.

"Good-bye, Mr. Schneider," said she. "I hope your election will go the right way; and if it doesn't, I hope the next one will. We shall meet again some time and somewhere, I dare say."

"Do you *want* to meet that—that animal again?" asked Moreton in a dissatisfied tone, as soon as his partner in misfortune had left the room.

"Oh, I'm simply dying to meet him again—what else could you expect? He is so good-looking and clever and refined and generally fascinating, isn't he? However,

I shall have to get on as best I can without him; for he has just been telling me that I mustn't count upon renewing the rapture of intercourse with him before the beginning of next year."

"Oh, he has, has he? And what reason did he give for inflicting such a cruel bereavement upon you?"

Lady Belvoir yawned. "What reason? Let me see; what was his reason? Do you know, I am afraid I have forgotten. But perhaps it doesn't very much matter. Let us dismiss the absent from our minds and give our attention to some one who has the merit of being present. You had an interesting confession to make to me, had you not?"

"Yes," answered Moreton, gloomily; "but since I saw you I have decided not to make it. I told you, you know, that I *was in despair* then, and now I am twice

as much in despair—if that is possible. I am not going to cut my throat, because that sort of thing is so disagreeable for one's relations; but I think I will go to Australia."

"I can't imagine any one better fitted for the hardships of colonial life. When do you start? And what made that unfeeling woman reject you, I wonder?"

"You know very well," returned Moreton, "that she hasn't rejected me, because I haven't asked her. I don't for one moment suppose that asking her would have been any use; but I can't ask her now. Things have happened which make that impossible."

"You don't say so! Would it be very indiscreet to inquire what things?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be indiscreet; nothing that you could say to me would be indiscreet. Only, unfortunately, I couldn't reply. I have got into a mess which I am bound to keep secret; all I can tell you is that, although

I am as innocent as a baby, I am not free to confess to you—to confess to any woman, I mean—how I love her.”

“That is very sad and very mysterious,” observed Lady Belvoir, gravely. “And will you never be free again?”

Moreton shrugged his shoulders. “Practically never,” he answered. “I shall be free in six months; but what is the good of being free in six months? She will have forgotten all about me by that time. Besides, I don’t believe she ever cared for me.”

Lady Belvoir kept her countenance admirably, though her suppressed merriment was great.

“It is difficult to believe that you can be in love with a woman whom you so thoroughly distrust,” she observed; “her memory may not be so short as you suppose. *But of course* I can give you no advice if

you decline to take me into your confidence. I may be wronging you ; yet it does sound to me very much as though you wanted to avoid proposing to her. You say you are as innocent as a baby—which may or may not be the case, but it doesn't exactly accord with the reputation that you bear—nevertheless, you mustn't open your lips for another six months. Why six months, rather than three months or a year? All this is very inexplicable to me."

"I knew it would be," sighed Moreton ; "but I can't help it. I would give all I possess—that isn't much, to be sure—to be able to speak more openly to you ; but the thing can't be done. In all my life I have only loved one woman——"

"Oh !" interjected Lady Belvoir.

"Yes ; you may laugh, but it's true, all the same. Only one woman ; the others were mere passing fancies. Well, I hope

she knows it, though she can't hear it from me."

"Not even when the six months are up? But perhaps that will be a long enough delay to cure you. I remember," continued Lady Belvoir, artlessly, "Lord Guise once saying to me that if a man could be kept for six months from proposing, he would never propose at all. That would be a most desirable state of things from his point of view."

"I know it would — confound him!" growled Moreton.

"But why confound him? It isn't he who prohibits you from speaking, I suppose? You would hardly obey him if he did. Well, since you are so very uncommunicative, I'm afraid there isn't much that I can do for you; and, of course, not knowing the woman's name, I can't judge of what your *chances* might be with her. Still, if silent

sympathy is any comfort to you, you can come to me for it as often as you want it."

Moreton responded by a gently reproachful look. He knew that Lady Belvoir was as well acquainted with the name of the unnamed one as he was. And had he not just stated that he must be severed from her for six months by a cruel fate? However, he felt that he could not conscientiously go any farther than he had already gone, so he said :

"You are awfully kind ; but I shan't be able to come to you for sympathy if I'm in Australia, you see."

"You will return from Australia, and on your arrival you will find me as sympathetic as ever. By the way, do you hold especially to Australia? If not, you might offer yourself as a travelling companion to Mr. Thorold, who is about to start for Japan and California."

“ Oh, Thorold is going to Japan, is he ? ” said Moreton ; and then he glanced half-questioningly at his informant, who preserved an impassive demeanour.

Well, it really would not do to hesitate and hint any longer. Fearing lest he should be led to betray what he had no right to betray, Moreton got up hastily and made his adieux. He did not say that he would be back in England by the beginning of the next year, but he allowed it to be inferred that that was probable ; and he ventured to express a hope that he would not be entirely forgotten during his absence. Lady Belvoir replied demurely that she never forgot her friends ; and when she took his hand she gave it a very slight pressure, which he thought himself justified in returning.

No sooner had he departed than Lady Belvoir made a gesture of triumph.

"I will be even with Guise for this!" she muttered. "The whole thing is as clear as crystal. He foresaw what was likely to happen to these men, and he made them swear by their gods that they wouldn't engage themselves to me until after a separation of six months. Of course he was sharp enough to make the prohibition general. Schneider said 'no particular lady;' and Dorothy Leslie has evidently been knocked over by a shot which wasn't aimed at her; but there isn't much doubt as to who was intended to be the victim of this diabolical plot. Very well, my dear Guise, since you choose to defy me, we will fight it out—*rira bien qui rira le dernier!*"

CHAPTER X.

THE CHIEF CONSPIRATOR IN DANGER



ONE afternoon, towards the close of the year treated of in this unpretending account of a shameful conspiracy, a somewhat dejected-looking gentleman was seated before the smoking-room fire of a mansion in the Midlands. He had been out hunting, and, as circumstances had caused him to abandon the chase rather earlier than other people, he had ensconced himself in this comfortable arm-chair to smoke a cigar and meditate awhile before going upstairs to dress for dinner. It was the chief conspirator. His muddy boots reposed upon the steel fender ; his right arm hung loosely by his side, his

fingers almost touching the floor ; his head was so sunk forward upon his breast that his nose and his reddish beard met. Anybody seeing him would have said, " Here is a man who is tired out ; in another five minutes he will have fallen asleep, dropped his cigar, and burnt a hole in the hearth-rug."

Lord Guise, however, was not sleepy ; he was only pensive, depressed, and uneasy in his mind. What he was saying to himself was :

" This is becoming simply intolerable ! Wherever I go, I am bound to meet that woman. It really almost looks as if people did it on purpose. Not that I should mind meeting her if only she could be ordinarily civil ; but one does like to be answered when one speaks. Hang it all ! why can't we be friends ? We always used to be. Now, I don't suppose

there is a man in all England who cares less about that kind of thing than I do ; still, I defy anybody to say that he enjoys seeing a pretty woman either yawn in his face or turn her back upon him every time that he makes an effort to perform his social duties. And I have never denied that she is a pretty woman. In fact, pretty isn't the word ; she is absolutely beautiful—the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, for that matter."

Here Lord Guise heaved a long sigh, shifted his position, and took several pulls at his cigar, which was nearly out.

"I'm not sure," he resumed presently, "that I haven't been a little bit too hard upon Sybil Belvoir ; I'm not sure that I haven't been too hard upon women generally. One grows more tolerant as one grows older. After all, what harm is there in flirtation ? And how do I know that she has ever

done anything worse than flirt? I don't believe she has; and certainly I don't believe a tithe of the stories which men who haven't exchanged a dozen words with her in their lives think themselves very knowing for telling about her. A nice lot they are themselves! I could tell her one or two things about some of these fellows who are always hanging round her which would make her open her eyes, I suspect, though she is by way of knowing everything. Of course it isn't permissible to tell tales, but, upon my word, I sometimes almost wish it was! Talk about the duplicity of women! Why, what can you expect of them when they have to contend against the duplicity of men?"

It will be perceived that in the course of the summer and autumn Lord Guise's views with regard to the sexes had undergone some modification. But that, perhaps,

was scarcely enough to account for his low spirits ; because, although one is sorry to have formed unjust judgments, one does not exactly make oneself miserable over mistakes to which, being but mortal, we are all liable. And, indeed, to sum matters up, Lord Guise was unhappy because a lady whom he had known from her childhood would have nothing to say to him. He was also puzzled ; otherwise, possibly, he would have been less unhappy. While he was revolving disconnected thoughts and vague conjectures in his mind, his host — a ruddy, jovial old gentleman — tramped in, and threw himself down upon a chair, dropping his hunting-crop.

“ Well, Guise,” said he, “ you’ve missed the quickest thing of the season.”

“ That,” observed Lord Guise, “ is of course. Who ever went out on a lame horse without missing the quickest thing of

the season? I don't want to hear about it, thank you. We shall have a good many trustworthy accounts of it before we are allowed to go to bed, no doubt. I suppose all the other men were well in it from start to finish?"

"Well, most of them, I believe. One or two of the women, too. I must say I enjoy seeing women ride straight to hounds."

"I don't believe it," answered Lord Guise, politely.

"Oh, you're a miso — what-d'ye-call-it; we all know that. You don't enjoy seeing women in the hunting-field or anywhere else. By the way, what's wrong with Lady Belvoir that she won't come out? She was as keen as mustard last year."

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Lord Guise. "Perhaps her nerve is beginning to go."

"No fear! I only wish I had half her pluck; but at my time of life one finds out that one isn't quite what one used to be. Do you know what my wife says? She says she believes Lady Belvoir has stopped hunting because you don't approve of it."

"That," observed Lord Guise, getting up and stretching himself, "is flattering to me; but as a shot it can't be called good. Lady Belvoir doesn't honour me by asking for my opinion of her proceedings, and nothing is more certain than that, if she did, she would decline to be influenced by it. When Lady Belvoir has given up doing all the things that I disapprove of, she will be a tolerably promising candidate for the Salvation Army."

"Oh, well, one must make allowances," said the good-natured old gentleman. "Perhaps, if you or I were in her

place—young, and pretty, and independent of any control, you know—we should act pretty much as she does, eh?”

“I haven’t a doubt of it,” answered Lord Guise. “Let us be thankful that we are not exposed to the same temptations. It’s about time to go and dress, isn’t it?”

Possibly this plea for leniency, coming as it did from an unprejudiced outsider, and chiming in with the voice of his own conscience, may not have been without a certain effect upon him. At any rate, when he had dressed and had joined the large party awaiting him in the drawing-room (Lord Guise was always late for dinner), he felt ready to make any allowance that could be reasonably expected of him for one situated as Lady Belvoir was. The only thing that he could make no allowance for was her marked and

persistent neglect of an old friend. Ever since the end of the London season—such a long time ago now—he had been perpetually encountering Lady Belvoir. He had met her at Goodwood; he had met her at Cowes; he had met her in Scotland, and at Doncaster, and at Newmarket; and now, as sure as ever he accepted an invitation to a country-house, so surely was her face among the first that he descried after his arrival. Well, it was not an unpleasant face to contemplate—quite the reverse—but it was invariably turned away the moment that he drew near, and this method of treatment, which at first had scarcely stirred his curiosity, had ended by provoking him beyond all endurance. What the deuce did she mean by it? What was all he wanted to know

Whatever she may have meant by it,

she evidently did not propose discontinuing it that evening. The friend of her childhood was requested to escort her to the dining-room ; but scarcely a word could be got out of her, though he did what in him lay to be amiable and conciliatory. No sooner had they taken their places than her shoulder was turned towards him, and from that time until the departure of the ladies all his efforts to attract her attention proved fruitless. Sometimes she did not appear to hear what he said, and even when she did reply, it was in the briefest possible terms. Lord Guise, like the generality of phlegmatic men, was obstinate and persistent. He was not going to be put off in that way any longer without knowing the reason why ; so he waited patiently until an opportunity occurred, later in the evening, of addressing Lady Belvoir privately ; and

very likely he did not think of asking himself by whom that opportunity had been created.

He drew a chair up beside hers, seated himself with a determined air, and said :

"Now, Sybil, I'm going to have it out with you. How have I offended you?"

"Have I ever said that I was offended?" she asked, raising her eyes slowly to his.

"No; because that would have been superfluous. But perhaps, after all, it isn't offence; perhaps it's aversion. If so, I should like to be told what I have done to incur it. We used to get on pretty well together once upon a time."

Lady Belvoir sighed ever so slightly. "I think," she remarked, "that that was before you took to saying unkind and spiteful things about me behind my back."

"What things?" asked Lord Guise, reddening a little. "Of course one does

sometimes say things — everybody does — about one's best friends which one would be sorry for them to hear; but it is the talebearers who are unkind and spiteful. I have called you a flirt, I admit."

"And you don't consider that a spiteful thing to say?"

"Come now, Sybil, you surely won't deny that you are a flirt!"

"I do deny it. Is it my fault if I can't make myself in the least pleasant or friendly to any man without his at once jumping to ridiculous conclusions? But it is useless to attempt excuses, and indeed it isn't worth while. I used to think that you were different from the others; but I have discovered my mistake. Pray, go on slandering me to your heart's content; I haven't complained, and I don't mean to complain."

Though this was said very proudly,

it was not said without a perceptible faltering in the speaker's voice which caused Lord Guise to feel both sorry and ashamed. He answered quite humbly that he had no wish to slander anybody — least of all one for whom he had always had the sincerest regard. Would she mind telling him of any particular instance in which he had slandered her?

"Oh, you wouldn't allow that it was slander," she returned. "Besides, I really don't care; you are welcome to say what you please. Only perhaps it is a little too much to expect that I should be overjoyed when I meet you. Have you seen anything of Mr. Schneider lately?"

Lord Guise knitted his brows and scanned her face sharply; but her lowered eyelids told no tales.

"Schneider?" he repeated; "yes, I saw him a few weeks ago. He has been

in high favour with the bigwigs since he reduced the Radical majority in Scotland, and now they are going to put him in for Slumberton, you know."

"I know nothing about him or his plans; he has seen fit to cut me dead. How delightful it is to be cut dead by a Mr. Schneider! And how pleasant it is to think that he has been warned against me by a friend who has always had the sincerest regard for me! I wonder why Mr. Moreton has fled to New Zealand, and I wonder who persuaded Percy Thorold to circumnavigate the globe!"

"Not I, at all events," answered Lord Guise; "I am innocent of having advised that circular tour. Or, at least, if I did tell him—and now that I come to think of it, I believe I did—that it would be a good way of spending the recess, it wasn't in order to get him out of your

way that I did so. In fact, I happen to know——”

“Oh, so do I!” interrupted Lady Belvoir. “I am quite aware that I had ceased to be a danger. You had already delivered him from me——”

“And you from him.”

“Yes, if you like. But your opinion of me was as bad as ever, and I dare say you may have thought that no friend of mine was likely to be much better than myself. Very well; opinion is free, and you can keep yours. You can do your best to deprive me of my friends, and you can object to everything that I do, and put the worst construction upon all my actions, only you really must not expect me to look as if I liked it.”

Again there was that unusual quaver in her ladyship's voice, and again her conscience-stricken hearer felt touched and penitent.

What she had said was so very nearly the truth that he could not set up much of a defence for himself; but he assured her that, if he had ever spoken unadvisedly or ill-naturedly of her, he was very sorry for it, and that he wouldn't do it again. As for Moreton and Schneider——

“Oh, what do I care about Moretons and Schneiders?” she interrupted, half-laughingly, half-impatiently. Then, all of a sudden, she jumped up and crossed the room to join a group of young men and maidens, leaving it to be inferred that what had vexed her had not been so much the loss of her admirers as the loss of her old friend's esteem.

Her old friend thought all this over seriously before he went to bed; and on the following day, which was again a hunting day, he surprised everybody by coming down in a tweed suit and announcing that

he meant to drive to the meet, if he might have a pony-trap. "And, perhaps," he added, "as Lady Belvoir isn't going to hunt, she will keep me company," which did not lessen the general astonishment.

Lord Guise, himself, was a little astonished when his proposition was at once acceded to, for he had been fully prepared for a rebuff. However, it seemed that Lady Belvoir's mood had changed during the night and that she was now willing to bury the hatchet without further explanations or reproaches.

"I am going," said she, as soon as she had settled herself in the little pony-cart and had drawn a fur rug round her, "to enjoy myself for once in a way. Just for this morning I want to forget everything disagreeable, and I should take it as a favour if you would do the same. Since we shall have to spend the next hour or two together,

our wisest plan will be to make the best of one another, don't you think so?"

And indeed it was not difficult to make the best of her, because from that moment she began to make the very best of herself. This was no longer Lady Belvoir, the professional beauty, the hard-hearted, cynical woman of the world; it was the Sybil of bygone years—pretty, wilful, high-spirited, but capable, as one who had known her well had formerly thought, of warm affections and generous impulses. It was of those bygone years alone that she chose to talk. She asked her companion whether he remembered taking her out hunting—"You didn't object to my hunting then, did you?" she observed in a parenthesis—and how she had rushed her horse at a fence, and had been within an ace of getting a nasty fall; and how she had almost cried when he scolded her for her bad riding.

Then there were other incidents which she recalled to his memory, and which he had supposed that she had long ago forgotten. In those far-away days he had been wont to give her good advice, cautioning her against the selfish and corrupt society which she was about to enter, and imploring her to distrust the advances of men whose character and previous history must be unknown to her. Well, she certainly had not profited by these counsels. Her development had been singularly, almost inexplicably, rapid; the bloom of her youth and innocence had been rubbed off at the very first touch. Thinking rather sadly of this, and of what she was, and what he had once hoped that she might be, Lord Guise could not help saying :

“ I never understood why you married Belvoir ; it was always a mystery to me.”

“ Was it ? ” she returned, with a quick

movement of her head towards him. "I am glad of that; I thought you were quite convinced that I married him for his position."

"I couldn't conceive of any other reason."

"I suppose not. Ah, well! it is an old story now, and nobody cares what my reason may have been; and since then I have been engaged to Percy Thorold and have thrown him over, and I have been more than half inclined to engage myself to a dozen other men. What does it matter? There is one right person, and only one, for everybody. Failing that person, Tom is as good as Dick, and Dick as Harry. Don't you think so?"

This and other speeches of a like nature produced a strange and disturbing effect upon Lord Guise. It was little enough that he thought about fox-hunting that day.

and although the hounds found at the first covert, and he witnessed the beginning of what promised to be a glorious run, he quite forgot to wish himself on horseback. During the homeward drive he scarcely spoke at all; nor did he put in an appearance at luncheon. While the ladies were doing justice to that meal he was walking up and down his bedroom, and saying to himself in agitated accents:

“Good Heavens, no! this will never do. I may be entirely mistaken, and even if I were not—just think of it! Once upon a time Sybil was as good a girl as ever lived; but of late years—oh, it’s notorious, you know. Facts are facts, and there’s no getting over them. I can only do one thing, and I’ll do it before I’m an hour older!”

The mistress of that house was an observant old woman, who knew how to put this and that together. It was therefore

with genuine reluctance and regret that she made a communication to Lady Belvoir later in the afternoon.

“Lord Guise has been telegraphed for, and has gone away in a great hurry,” she said. “It seems that he was actually out of the house before we had finished luncheon. He didn’t like to disturb us, he says in the note that he left for me. I am so sorry!”

But Lady Belvoir did not appear to be sorry at all. She was in great spirits that evening; she laid aside the air of demure propriety which had characterised her since her arrival; she took a leading part in certain high jinks, which it is needless to particularise; and towards the small hours of the morning she wrote to a correspondent of hers in Westmoreland a letter, in which the following passages occurred:

“I told you I would do it; and now it is as good as done. Lord Guise fled pre-

capitately from me to-day, lest a worse thing should befall him. Perhaps you think I shall give chase? My dear girl, it is not I who shall pursue him, but he who will come crawling back to me. . . . I heard from Percy the other day. He was at San Francisco, and was as miserable as you could wish him to be. In a few weeks he will be back in England, and then, my dear, you will be good enough to put your pride in your pocket and forgive him. In fact, you will have to do so; because if you don't, I shall make no scruple about telling him what I know to be the case. There isn't such a superabundance of happiness in this world that one can afford to throw away one's chance for the sake of punishing a goose. As for Guise, who deserves no mercy, he shall get none. I mean to lay that man prostrate at my feet, and when he is there I shall simply dance

on his head. Nobody can call me a rancorous person ; but in this case I am not avenging private wrongs, I am acting as the champion of my sex. And my sex may feel sure that I will do the thing thoroughly."

o

CHAPTER XI.

ONE OF THE EXILES RETURNS

IF Mrs. Leslie did not quit her northern home for sunnier climes that winter, it was not because the will was lacking on her part. She did not like frost and snow; she did not much like Lady Belvoir as a near neighbour, and she did not at all like the prospect of renewing acquaintance with a certain unsatisfactory cousin of Lady Belvoir's on his return from foreign parts. It was true that no great harm had apparently been done, that Dorothy's spirits and health remained excellent and that Mr. Thorold might quite possibly have abandoned his

expressed intention of visiting Westmoreland; still one would fain avoid all avoidable risks. But Mrs. Leslie's means were limited, and a season in London costs money, and it is no easy matter to find a winter tenant for a country house in Westmoreland. In Westmoreland, therefore, this anxious mother continued to reside; nor was her anxiety, which many trifles had contributed to keep alive, at all diminished when, in the beginning of the new year, Lady Belvoir returned home. Lady Belvoir had been away, paying visit after visit, for a long time past; but now—so Mrs. Leslie learnt from Dorothy—she meant to give herself a few weeks of rest and quiet before proceeding to London.

“I suppose that means that she is going to fill her house with people,” was Mrs. Leslie's comment.

But Dorothy said: "Oh, no, I don't think so; she told me that she was only expecting one or two of her relations."

And Mrs. Leslie felt a delicacy about inquiring whether any one of the name of Thorold was included amongst these. The fact is that no mention had been made of the absent politician between the mother and daughter since the day when he had taken leave of them.

Now, it came to pass on a bitter January afternoon, when the ground was covered with freshly-fallen snow, and the sky was of a dull slate colour, and ragged, dirty-looking clouds were drifting along the slopes of the hills, that Miss Leslie, trudging briskly homewards from the Vicarage, was overtaken by a pedestrian who must have descried her from afar and

caught her up with difficulty ; for he was so short of breath that he could do no more than gasp out : " How do you do, Miss Leslie ? " as he removed his hat.

Close inspection might have revealed the fact that, in addition to his physical exertions, he was affected by mental agitation, which is always a bad thing for the respiratory organs ; but Dorothy did not inspect him very closely. She only turned her head for a moment and said, without any appearance of surprise :

" Oh, how do you do, Mr. Thorold ? You are staying with Lady Belvoir, I suppose ? "

It is most disconcerting to be received in that matter-of-fact way by a person for whose sake you have just arrived at express speed from the other side of the world, and Percy was proportionately dis-

concerted. He could not help saying in a slightly injured voice :

"I was in California only three weeks ago. But perhaps," he added, somewhat more cheerfully, "Sybil told you that I was coming here."

"I believe she did," answered Dorothy, composedly. "Besides, when we last saw you, you yourself said that you might perhaps be in our parts in the course of the winter." And then, as a pause ensued which he seemed to find some difficulty in breaking, she resumed: "It isn't a very good time of the year to see Westmoreland; I should think that in weather like this you must wish yourself back in California."

"I have only one wish as regards California," he answered, with needless emphasis, "and that is a most devout one

that I may never see it again. Or Japan either, or India, or the Sandwich Islands, or any other of the abominable wildernesses through which I have been wandering for six weary months."

Dorothy raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"I never heard those countries described as wildernesses before," she remarked. "What a pity that you should have travelled such a long way and not enjoyed yourself!"

"Oh, as far as that goes, I didn't anticipate enjoyment," answered Percy.

He was now walking beside her, for it was impossible to stand still in such a temperature. "I was on my way to call upon you," he said, presently.

Dorothy could do no less than beg him to carry out his intention; and this she

did, though without any great cordiality of manner.

"Yes," he went on, rather nervously, "I was obliged to come to-day, because, unfortunately, I am very much pressed for time. My cousin tells me that she wants to go up to London immediately, so that I felt I mustn't miss a chance of seeing you." He added—for somehow or other there seemed to be no possibility of leading up to his point by degrees—"Didn't you think it very odd of me to rush off round the world at a moment's notice?"

"Well," she replied, consideringly, "I dare say I might have thought it odd if you hadn't explained to me that everybody did that sort of thing nowadays, and that you were expected to do what everybody else did."

"Did I say that? I don't remember

what I said ; but I had to say something, and I couldn't tell you my real reason then, as, thank Heaven ! I can now. Anyhow, you must have seen that I was not starting on this journey of my own free will. And, Miss Leslie, I think—I am sure—you must have seen something more than that. I think you must have known very well that what made me hate leaving England so was that that implied leaving you."


It was now Dorothy's turn to look perturbed and embarrassed. She had not been prepared for so prompt a declaration as this, nor did she know how to reply to it. As she had a strict regard for truth, she decided upon the safe plan of making no reply at all ; and Percy resumed :

"Of course you knew it ; you couldn't help knowing it — I made no secret of my love for you. It would have been better

if I had said less until I was sure of being able to say more ; but the truth is, I never for one moment supposed that my mouth would be closed at the eleventh hour, as it was. I will tell you presently how that came to pass, and I hope you will see that I wasn't very much to blame in the matter ; but it is such a long story, that I haven't the heart to embark upon it while I am still in suspense. Besides, it may be that there will be no need for me to trouble you with the story at all. I mean that if

- you intended to refuse me last summer—did you intend to refuse me, Miss Leslie ?”

This was certainly not a fair question, and Dorothy would have been justified in declining to answer it. Declining to answer such questions is, however, pretty much the same thing as answering them ; so she said, in a resentful tone :



"Lady Belvoir seems to think that to ask for what you wanted would have been quite sufficient then, and that it will be quite sufficient now. No doubt she has imparted her views upon the subject to you."

"She has been very kind and—and encouraging," Percy was compelled to admit; "but I think that was chiefly because she was sorry for me and saw how much I needed a little encouragement. Then, too, she had faith enough in me to take my word for it that I did not leave England from any discreditable or dishonourable cause. But she has never pretended to know for certain that you cared for me."

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Dorothy, flushing up; "she actually confessed that she didn't know that for certain! I am

amazed at her moderation. Still, I don't think I will trouble you to tell me that long story, Mr. Thorold ; you really don't owe me any explanation or apology."

So far, Percy had not put his case very skilfully, and her annoyance was natural enough ; but a man who is thoroughly in earnest is not easily abashed, and Mr. Thorold was resolved to have a plain answer to a plain question. After a moment's silence, he said :

"I know you are too straightforward to trifle with me, and I don't believe you will think me conceited for confessing that I had hopes before I left London. It isn't a question of will or judgment ; one loves or one doesn't love, for the simple reason that one can't help oneself, and if you don't and can't love me, all the eloquence in the world would do me no

good." Then he stood still and made a half turn, so as to face her. "Must I say good-bye now?" he asked.

If Dorothy had not rehearsed a scene resembling this in many particulars, she would have been indeed an abnormal young woman; but the worst of such mental rehearsals is that they are liable to be rendered altogether useless if the second person concerned in them fails to act his part, and it must be owned that Miss Leslie had expected to find her suitor a little more humble. As it was, she could only look down and trace lines upon the snow with the tip of her boot, which is no way to treat a man who is lacking in humility.

However, when this mode of procedure had led to its inevitable result, and when some five or ten minutes had been spent in a manner which was doubtless found agree-

able by two deserving persons, it see that, after all, Percy was properly impre with a sense of his own unworthin Having said some rather extravagant th as to that, and having satisfied himself he was Dorothy's first love (who does hasten to satisfy himself upon such po and how many men, it may be wonder receive replies as truthful as that w this lucky fellow was privileged to receive he lamented, with evident sincerity, his own record could not be represented as equally blank.

"There's no use," he sighed, "in denying that for a good many years I was much in love with my cousin Sybil. (I suppose it would be true to say that I wasn't really in love with her, but with some imaginary being whom I pictured to me in her place. I can't be thankful enough

that my eyes were opened before I met you, Dorothy!"

"She is a great deal kinder and better than you choose to allow," declared Dorothy, who could afford to be generous.

"Well—perhaps. Oh, yes; I dare say she is. But I stupidly took her for a sample of women in general, and not so very long ago I had quite made up my mind that I would have nothing more to do with women for the rest of my life. That was how it was that I allowed myself to be dragged into that idiotic conspiracy of Guise's. By the way, I must tell you about the conspiracy. It was one evening last spring, just before I met you for the first time. Three of us were dining with Guise at his club, and he was holding forth upon the folly of marrying for love. He said a man in love was the worst possible judge of

the woman he loved, and I think we agreed with him more or less."

"Do you still agree with him?" Doro inquired.

"No; because I am older and wiser now than I was then; the experience that I had had at the time seemed to lend support to his view. Well, there was a good deal of talk, to which I didn't listen very particularly until I heard Guise proposing to start a select society of bachelors for purposes of mutual protection. Every man who joined it was to give his honour as a gentleman that he wouldn't offer marriage to any lady in the course of the ensuing year without having previously consulted his colleagues. And he was to agree to be bound by their decision: that is to say, if they disapproved of her or thought he wouldn't be happy with her, he was to abstain from speaking

or writing to her for six months. Of course I treated the whole scheme as a joke ; but I had no particular objection to taking the required pledge, because I was perfectly certain that I shouldn't want to propose to anybody before the year was out. I dare say the other two men may have had the same conviction about themselves ; for, as far as I remember, we none of us raised any difficulties. It just shows how little one can foresee the future, and how careful one ought to be about committing oneself."

"It does indeed !" agreed Dorothy. "I suppose that is why Lord Guise felt it so necessary to protect you. And to think that, in spite of all his precautions, he should have failed !"

Percy drew a long breath. "Yes," he said, "I have had better luck than I de-

served, and better luck than I expected last July, I can tell you. Of course, as soon as I made up my mind that I couldn't let you leave London without telling you how I loved you, I had to summon a meeting of this abominable society, and then a most extraordinary thing happened. For when we met it appeared, if you'll believe me, that two out of the other three members were in my own predicament. Well, one might have thought that, as all we wanted of each other was to be let alone, it would have been easy to come to an understanding ; but unluckily it didn't prove so. The other two happened to have fallen in love with the same lady ; so that naturally they fell out, and I myself was obliged to vote against one of them, and the result was that they were both condemned to exile. After that, they retaliated upon me, and

Guisse triumphed all along the line. Wasn't it a disastrous coincidence?"

"Very," answered Dorothy, who did not seem to be as much surprised by this harrowing tale as the narrator had anticipated. "But why did you invite opposition by voting against Mr. Schneider—or was it against Mr. Moreton?"

"And pray, what makes you think that Schneider and Moreton were the two men in question?"

"Oh, Lady Belvoir told me that long ago. You forget that they both had to take leave of her, and to make some sort of lame excuse for cutting her acquaintance until after an interval of six months."

"So you have known the truth all along!"

"Not exactly; but Lady Belvoir was clever enough to guess what the truth must

be, and kind enough to let me hear her conjectures. She thought they might interest me, you see."

"Well, really that was both clever and kind of Sybil!" exclaimed Percy, gratefully. "Kind to me, I mean."

And when he imparted the news of his engagement that evening to his cousin, he did not forget to thank her for the important part which she had taken in bringing about that happy event.

"You certainly do owe me some thanks," Lady Belvoir said; "but even if I hadn't been glad to do you a service I should have felt it my bounden duty to frustrate the designs of that wretch Guise. It is all very fine for him to talk about the protection of bachelors in general; but if that was his object, why didn't he try to make a few more recruits? The fact is that his plot was

aimed simply and solely against me — and before I have done with him I will make him very sorry that he ever attacked me.”

“Dorothy gave me a hint that you meant to punish him for his sins,” remarked Percy, smiling; “but what can you do with such a hardened reprobate? Do you — do you really think of marrying him, Sybil?”

“There is an innocent sincerity about your epigrams which makes me truly thankful that I am not in Dorothy’s shoes,” said Lady Belvoir, tranquilly. “No, I do not propose to marry Lord Guise — I would rather marry a crossing-sweeper, and so I shall tell him. But he shall beg and implore me to marry him; I can promise you that much.”

CHAPTER XII

LADY BELVOIR TAKES HER REVENGE

PERCY THOROLD might have felt more interest in the avenging retribution with which his friend Lord Guise, was menaced if he had believed in the probability of its ever being carried into effect ; but he suspected that Guise would prove too hard a nut for even Lady Belvoir to crack, and in any case he was disposed to deprecate hasty action.

“ Why,” he asked his cousin at breakfast the next morning, “ should you rush to London and open siege operations in this breathless way ? You’ll only frighten him. Besides, you must remember that

can't propose to you without our permission; and we shall undoubtedly inflict a six months' sentence upon him if he applies to us. That is the very least that we can do for one who has shown so much kindly care for our happiness."

"Who told you that I hadn't opened siege operations already?" returned Lady Belvoir; "and who told you that I am going up to London to see Lord Guise? Your esteemed president isn't the only man in London; he isn't even the only member of your society. If yours were not a naturally selfish character, and if you were not made doubly selfish just now by the condition that you are in, you would have given a thought to two absent friends who have been treated quite as badly as you have. I have heard that Mr. Moreton has come back from New Zealand, and the *Morning*

Post tells me that the new Member for Slumberton has arrived in town."

"Oh—I see! Poor fellows!"

"I don't know why you should pity them both. It is obvious that in a Christian country I can only marry one of them, and to be married by me seems to be the most terrible fate that your imagination can picture."

"Oh, you'll marry neither of them; but you won't let them depart in peace, I'm afraid. That's why I am sorry for them."

"My dear Percy, you have never understood me and you never will. On the other hand, I understand you perfectly, and I understand that what is troubling you at the present moment isn't the thought of Mr. Schneider's or Mr. Moreton's sorrows, but the prospect of having to leave Westmoreland and Dorothy Leslie. Well, now

I'll show you how benevolent I am. I must be off to-morrow ; but if you like to stay where you are, there's no reason in the world why you shouldn't. Whether I am here or not, fires have to be kept going all over this great, cold house, and you might as well warm yourself before them as not until Parliament meets. Later on I'll ask Dorothy to come up and stay with me, and I suppose I shall have to take in the old woman too, if it's a question of buying a trousseau. Well, anything to oblige."

It need scarcely be said that Percy gratefully accepted this offer ; and perhaps, all things considered, he was not very sorry that his cousin felt it incumbent upon her to take her departure. There is always a certain feeling of awkwardness in sitting between the old love and the new, even

though the old love may have abdicated as willingly as Lady Belvoir had done. And so, during the succeeding fortnight, Mr. Thorold enjoyed himself very much, notwithstanding the wintry weather, and Dorothy was happy, and the soul of Mrs. Leslie was satisfied. One must indeed be hard to please if one be not satisfied with a son-in-law whose means are ample, whose character stands high, and whose political future is full of promise.

Meanwhile Lady Belvoir also was enjoying herself, though possibly in a somewhat less legitimate fashion. On the day after that of her arrival in Carlton House Terrace, an agitated visitor was shown into her presence; and this was really remarkable, because if there was one thing from which Lord Guise might be said to be free, as a general rule, it was agitation.

Not only, however, was he perturbed now, but he made no effort to disguise the fact. Without responding to the commonplaces with which she greeted him, he at once made known the object of his visit. He said :

“Sybil, I think I have known you long enough to have the privilege of waiving ceremony with you when I feel inclined. At all events, I am going to waive ceremony now.”

“But that isn’t precisely a novelty, is it?” interpolated Lady Belvoir. “You were a little bit uncereemonious in the way you took leave of me—or, rather, omitted to take leave of me—not so long ago.”

“I was called away in a hurry.”

“By whom or by what, I wonder? Never mind, though; it is no business of mine, and I am not inquisitive. Please

go on being unceremonious. You are going to say something very disagreeable, of course?"

"I dare say it will be more disagreeable for me to say than for you to hear; but I find that I really can't hold my tongue about it. I saw that little beast Schneider to-day."

"Poor Mr. Schneider! What has he done to be called a little beast? Did you think him a little beast when you were so kind as to introduce him to me?"

"Yes, I suppose so; I really don't remember what I thought about him at that time. What I know now is that he is an admirer of yours, and that he has the impudence to intend asking you to marry him."

"But I thought you knew that ever so long ago," observed Lady Belvoir, calmly.

“Was it on account of his impudence that you voted in favour of his being forbidden to speak to me for six months? Mr. Moreton, too, was he impudent, or only unfit to take care of himself?”

“Oh, the cat is out of the bag then!”

“The cat, as you say, is out of the bag. You didn’t suppose that she would remain in it for many hours after time was up, did you? And now that she is out, I may say that a meaner, mangier animal I never beheld. However, it is some comfort to know that you haven’t succeeded in parting Percy Thorold and Dorothy Leslie. Will it astonish you to hear that they are engaged? Percy came straight on to me in Westmoreland, after he had landed at Liverpool, and the next day he made it all right. No thanks to you, though. How popular you will become before long,

if you go on meddling with other people's affairs in this way!"

"I am very glad that Thorold has got what he wanted," said Lord Guise, meekly. "It was no fault of mine that he didn't get it before, or that Miss Leslie had contrived to offend the other two men. Personally, I hadn't a word to say against her."

"Oh, no; your machinations were directed against somebody else. Well, I am very much obliged to you, I am sure. You certainly know how to avail yourself of the privileges of an old friend; and it isn't a strict regard for ceremony that is ever likely to inconvenience you."

Lord Guise sighed.

"Ah, you are in a very different mood to-day from the one that you were in when I saw you last," said he.

"That was an interlude; I told you so

at the time. Occasionally one does like to forget the truth about one's old friends for an hour or two, if one can."

"But perhaps you don't know the truth, Sybil. Anyhow, I don't want to defend myself now; I only want to defend you against yourself. I have a horrible fear that you may be tempted to throw yourself away upon a little, low-born alien."

"Oh, you really would consider that throwing myself away? I should have thought that, setting one thing against another, you would have placed me pretty much on the same level with Mr. Schneider."

"You say that to vex me, not because you believe it. For Heaven's sake, Sybil, don't make the mistake of imagining that any amount of wealth could atone to you for the humiliation of calling that man your husband."

"He is a very decent sort of man in his way," said Lady Belvoir.

"Your butler and your coachman are very decent sort of men in their way, I have no doubt. Come, Sybil, I don't often ask a favour of you, do I? At least promise me that, whatever happens, you won't marry Schneider."

"Why should I make such a promise? I have told you already what my views about these things are. There is one right person; all the rest are so very much alike in point of repulsiveness that it is hardly worth while to draw distinctions between them."

"Is there a 'right person' in your case?" asked Lord Guise; and his voice was not very steady as he put the question.

"Who knows? If there were, I should hardly tell you, should I? At any rate,

I don't think any such person is likely to interpose between me and Mr. Schneider."

Lord Guise remained silent. Within him was raging a desperate conflict, of which his interlocutor was fully cognizant, and which she watched with much satisfaction through her half-closed eyelids. It ended abruptly after the fashion in which she had quite anticipated that it would end. Starting to his feet and grasping his hat, he said :

"Well, I can do no more than protest, and that isn't much good. All the same, I felt that I could do no less. Good-bye, Sybil; thank you for having listened to me so patiently."

"Not at all," answered Lady Belvoir, politely; "it has amused me very much to listen to you, I assure you."

With that she gave him her hand and

a queer look which caused him to lower his eyes hastily, and the interview terminated.

About an hour after this a smartly-attired and complacent-looking gentleman of low stature stepped briskly up to the door of Lady Belvoir's mansion and inquired whether her ladyship was at home. This gentleman was not unknown to her ladyship's domestics, who may have received instructions respecting him ; for he was at once admitted and conducted upstairs. Mr. Schneider had perhaps no right to look complacent or to feel hopeful ; yet the world had gone so remarkably well with him of late that his self-confidence, if illogical, was not wholly unnatural. During the summer and autumn he had largely increased the number of his aristocratic acquaintances ; he had had a singularly successful racing

season ; he had become a Member of Parliament, and he had looked into his affairs with most satisfactory results. Finally, he had been informed, through what had appeared to him to be an inspired channel, that Lady Belvoir had arrived in London. All these things caused him to believe that his star was in the ascendant, and his heart beat high with joyous anticipation as he mounted the stairs with which he had been so agreeably familiar six months before.

Yet, after the lapse of barely half an hour, this favourite of fortune might have been seen retracing his steps with a sadly crestfallen mien. As he passed out of the door, he glanced suspiciously at the servants to see whether they were smiling ; he actually forgot to smooth his hat before putting it on, and he wandered off in an aimless way, as if he neither knew nor cared

whither he was going—which was in truth the case. Possibly it was unconscious cerebration that took him to a club of which both he and Lord Guise were members; for it is certain that of all people the last whom he desired to see at that moment was Lord Guise.

Lord Guise, however, desired very much to see him, and it was Lord Guise's habit to take what he wanted. He took poor Schneider by the arm and led him into an untenanted room. "Well," said he, "what luck? Of course I know where you have been."

"It's all up," answered Schneider, gloomily; "she'll have nothing to say to me."

Guise made an effort to conceal the satisfaction which he felt and evince the sympathy which he did not feel. It was

not a very successful one ; but that was of little consequence, for his friend was not looking at him. He said :

“ Well, you see, Schneider, no woman likes to be cut. You would have done better to go abroad, like Thorold and Moreton.”

“ Oh, it wasn't that,” answered Schneider, gazing despondently at the carpet ; “ she knows I couldn't help myself, and she said she quite understood that it was all your doing—as of course it was. No ; the fact of the matter is that there is some other fellow.”

“ Did she tell you that there was ? ” asked Lord Guise, quickly.

“ Not in so many words ; but I think she meant me to take it that there was somebody. She said—but after all I don't know why I should tell you what she said ; it wouldn't interest you.”

Lord Guise, however, was of opinion that it would interest him greatly, and Schneider was prevailed upon without much difficulty to relate what had passed between him and Lady Belvoir. It appeared that she had been perfectly frank with him. She had confessed that an increased income would be extremely welcome to her; that she was free from any prejudice as regarded pedigree, and that for him individually she had just about as much regard as she had for most people. Nevertheless, she found herself unable to accept his offer.

"Whatever one's convictions may be," she had told him, "one can't alter one's nature, and mine, unluckily, has a taint of romance in it which is apt to crop up at the most inconvenient moments and upset all my plans. Little as you might suppose it to

look at me, I am just one of those women who form a foolish attachment and sacrifice everything to it."

"And then," observed Lord Guise, "you naturally wanted to know the name of the man to whom she had become foolishly attached."

"Well, yes; but of course she wouldn't tell me. However, it was easy enough to guess. When I remember the things that Moreton has said to me about her, I must say that I agree as to the foolishness of the attachment; but that is her look-out and his, not mine."

"Oh, you think Moreton is the man?"

Mr. Schneider hadn't a doubt of it; but it is scarcely surprising that Lord Guise should have arrived at a different conclusion. He got rid of Lady Belvoir's discomfited

suitor as soon as he could, and went home in a very troubled and irresolute condition of mind. "I will not," he muttered, repeatedly, "be a fool." Yet he went on to ask himself whether a man who does what will at least secure him a brief period of supreme happiness can be properly called a fool—which is a most dangerous line of thought to follow out. One thing, at all events, he was determined upon, and that was that he would abstain for the present from calling in Carlton House Terrace. The representations of an old friend might or might not have been instrumental in causing Lady Belvoir to decline Schneider's millions; but assuredly these would not be needed in order to bring about Moreton's dismissal. That young gentleman was notoriously inconstant and had no money, no talents, nothing in the world except

his handsome face. And Sybil would not abandon all ambition for the sake of a handsome face. "She isn't old enough for that yet," Lord Guise reflected somewhat cynically.

It was therefore without any inward feelings of uneasiness or uncertainty that he encountered Moreton in Pall Mall a few days after this, and inquired pleasantly whether New Zealand was a nice sort of place to spend the winter in.

"Not having spent the winter there, I don't know," answered Moreton; "as far as I got, it didn't strike me as the kind of place where I should care to live. However, as the governor paid my expenses out and back, I didn't mind having a look at it; and I dare say the voyage did me good."

"You certainly look more fit than you

did when I saw you last," observed Lord Guise. "Come into the club and have some lunch ; I should like to hear whether your spirits as well as your health have improved since then."

At first Moreton was not disposed to be communicative upon this point. "Oh, bother!" he said, when questioned ; "what's the use of talking about it?" But a bottle of champagne had a softening influence upon him, and eventually he consented to gratify his host's curiosity.

"I fared no better and no worse than I had expected," said he. "I went through the form of proposing to her, because I was almost bound in honour to do that ; but it didn't surprise me in the least to be reminded that last year was last year. I never deceived myself about her ; I always knew just exactly what she was, and that

if there was the ghost of a chance for me at one moment a delay of six months would be enough to extinguish it six times over. It's odd how ungenerous women are! She took up the line of declaring that it was I who had changed and that she had foreseen from the first how it would be. Then, when I accused her of having trifled with me, she admitted it in the most unblushing way. She said she had only wanted to show me that she could bring me to my knees if she chose. That's a nice sort of confession to make, isn't it?"

"I dare say she knew that you wouldn't break your knees, or your heart either," remarked Lord Guise.

"I don't see how she could know anything of the kind. But of course not seeing a person for six months does make

a difference ; and then, as I tell you, I had no illusions about her. She's just what you have always said she was — a thoroughly bad lot."

"I don't recollect ever saying that."

"Oh, come! Besides, it's what everybody knows. Well, I'm free to admit that you and the other fellows did me a good turn, though I don't think I'll renew my membership at the end of the year. One can't tell what may happen, and perhaps if you sent me to New Zealand again I might not be able to feel that I had had such a good deliverance as this time."

"It is pleasant to have one's wisdom and foresight recognised," observed Lord Guise ; "still everybody isn't a weathercock. Schneider and Thorold have stood the test, and one of them has had his reward."

"Ah, so I hear. I'm sorry for him, poor chap, because Miss Leslie didn't strike me as a very amiable young woman. At the same time, one must allow that she hasn't a stain upon her character—which is more than can be said for certain other ladies whom we know."

And now, to Moreton's great astonishment, he received one of the sharpest and most dignified rebukes that had ever been administered to him.


"That is a speech which no gentleman ought to make," said Lord Guise, "and I hope you won't make it again. Sybil Belvoir has flirted a good deal, first and last, as we are all aware; but you haven't the slightest excuse for saying anything worse of her, and I wonder that you don't feel how cowardly such insinuations are. Women, of course, are given to

whispering away one another's character but I really do think that a man ought to be above that kind of thing."

Moreton, much abashed, stammered out a sort of apology, which Lord Guise interrupted by saying, curtly: "Well, don't let it happen again, that's all." After which he changed the subject.

This was all very well, and it is only right that one should take up the cudgel on behalf of one's absent friends; but the unfortunate thing was that Lord Guise was not quite as certain as he professed to be that Moreton had no excuse for speaking as he had done. He tried very hard to think that Sybil was neither better nor worse than other pretty women upon whom admiration is forced; but he was not entirely successful. He could not forget circumstances which were within his own knowledge.

ledge, nor did he much like that cool confession of hers that she had ensnared Moreton for the mere purpose of showing what she could do when she liked. If that was her motive in one case, why should it not be in another? Then he began to say to himself that, after all, he had no right to throw stones. *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*, and it isn't so very difficult to understand the feelings of a woman who has loved in vain and who is pestered all day and every day by the attentions of lovers who are simply wearisome to her. Such a woman might find a not unnatural consolation in avenging herself upon the whole of the opposite sex. And supposing that, after the lapse of years, she should find that that "right person" of whom she had spoken had really loved her all along, though perhaps he himself had scarcely been




aware of it? Would she not then become again what she had once been, and might not the sponge be passed over events which neither he nor she could wish to recall to memory? *Quid si prisca redit Venus, diductosque iugo cogit aëneo?*

It was in meditations of this nature that Lord Guise indulged during several consecutive days; and everybody must see how perilous they were. He himself saw it, and had recourse to the old remedy of flight. He was seen no more in London during the early part of that session, when Mr. Schneider took his seat as Member for Slumberton, and Percy Thorold gathered fresh laurels as a debater; and if anybody missed him it did not, at all events, appear to be Lady Belvoir, who was in the best of good spirits at that time.

Mrs. and Miss Leslie were duly invited to Carlton House Terrace, and the trousseau was purchased with the aid of their hostess's taste and experience, and the conduct of the latter lady continued to be in all respects exemplary. Then, shortly after Easter, a wedding took place down in Westmoreland, which was attended by many personages of high degree, but at which Lord Guise was unable to be present, by reason of certain pressing engagements elsewhere, the nature of which he did not specify.

Percy, in talking this over with his bride, confided to her a very strange idea which had come into his head.

"There's something queer about Guise," said he; "he doesn't write like himself, and Moreton told me that he had spoken about Sybil in a way—however, I may



be quite wrong. Only I can't help thinking that he is a little bit smitten, and that he is afraid to trust himself near her."

But busy statesmen, who can allow themselves but a brief honeymoon, cannot be expected to trouble their minds much about the eccentricities of friends who are out of sight; and it was with loud ejaculations of amazement that Mr. Thorold perused a letter which he found waiting for him at Venice some weeks after his marriage.

"Just read that!" he said, tossing the sheet over to his wife. "It really is beyond everything!"

And this was what Dorothy read:

"MY DEAR THOROLD,

"As a year has now elapsed since

the constitution of our 'Bachelors' Mutual Aid and Protection Society,' and as the society has died a natural death, none of us having signified the intention of renewing his pledge, I do not, of course, owe an account of my actions to any of you. Still I think you may be interested in hearing that I am engaged to be married to Sybil Belvoir. I have no doubt that you will set me down as inconsistent, and probably you will make merry at my expense. As a matter of fact, I am not inconsistent at all, nor have I changed my ideas with regard to matrimony. I still think that most people blunder into it without knowing where they are going; and as I have allowed a good many years to pass before taking this step, I do not consider myself open to the charge of having acted precipitately. However, I make you wel-

come to the admission that until lately I have had an altogether mistaken opinion of Sybil. You, I am sure, have a mistaken opinion of her still; but possibly Mrs. Thorold may induce you to alter it.

“Ever yours,

“GUISE.”

“Well,” asked Percy of his wife, “do you think you can make me alter my opinion that this is a shocking plant?”

“I don’t understand it,” Dorothy replied, thoughtfully. “I knew that she intended to make Lord Guise propose to her, but I am almost sure that she didn’t intend to accept him.”

And when the news of Lord Guise’s engagement was made public there were

a good many people in Mrs. Thorold's predicament. Some professed to know that Lady Belvoir was marrying a second time out of pique; others, better informed, remarked that Lord Guise would soon be a duke, and was already a very rich man; only a few were bold enough to aver that she had fallen in love with that middle-aged, red-bearded philosopher. To the present day no explanation of the phenomenon has been vouchsafed by the only person who is in a position to give an authentic one. Possibly, after digging a pit for another, she fell into the midst of it herself; more probably her motives, like the motives of most of us under most circumstances, were mixed. In any case, her husband does not appear to have repented of his bargain as yet. But he looks a little sheepish when he meets Mr.

Schneider or Mr. Moreton, and it is certain that he has forfeited the respect which those gentlemen once entertained for his judgment.

THE END

CATALOGUE
OF THE
RECENT PUBLICATIONS
OF
JOHN W. LOVELL CO.

142 to 150 WORTH STREET

AND

3, 4, 5 & 6 MISSION PLACE

NEW YORK

ALL our publications are for sale at
the leading bookstores throughout
the United States and Canada, and will
be sent post-paid, on receipt of price.
Full catalogues mailed on application.

JOHN W. LOVELL CO.'S RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Plain Tales from the Hills. - BY RUDYARD KIPLING

A collection of stories. Brilliant sketches of character, Indian and European, which reflect with striking vividness the incidents and surroundings of station life in India; its shadows as well as its pleasures, its humorous no less than its tragic side. It is decidedly an entertaining book, and those to whom Indian life is at all familiar, will find it doubly so.

CLOTH, GILT, \$1.00. PAPER COVER, 50 CENTS.

A March in the Ranks. - - BY JESSIE FOTHERGILL Author of "A First Violin."

The whole English speaking and reading world has heard of "A First Violin," and the impression made by the story is one which will lead to a hearty welcome for this new novel from the pen of the gifted author.

CLOTH, GILT, \$1.00. PAPER COVER, 30 CENTS.

A Sydney Sovereign. - - - BY TASMA Author of "Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill."

The London press speaks of "Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill" as the best novel of the year, and in this later work the author sustains the enviable reputation already acquired.

CLOTH, GILT, \$1.00. PAPER COVER, 30 CENTS.

Cosette. - - - BY KATHERINE MACQUOID

In this story, the author has taken the life of the lower classes and clothed it in a poetical atmosphere at once realistic and delightful. It is "Zola" without "Zola's" vulgarity, retaining that vivid insight into the manners and customs of French low life; the coarser parts of the conversations which Zola delights in repeating, have been cut out to give place to more entertaining and more elevating sketches of character.

CLOTH, GILT, \$1.00. PAPER COVER, 30 CENTS.

JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

The Christian Theosophy Series.

BY JOHN HAMLIN DEWEY, D.D.

A NEW AND ORIGINAL SERIES OF BOOKS DESIGNED TO UNFOLD AND PRACTICALLY APPLY THE THEOSOPHY OF THE CHRIST.

NO. 1, THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE. NO. 2, THE PATHWAY OF THE SPIRIT.

These books throw a flood of light on the nature and destiny of the soul, and the yet undeveloped powers and unutilized resources of the human spirit. No such direct and practical exposition of the spiritual nature and psychic powers of man, nor of the conditions of their immediate development and activity, has heretofore been given. No student of the higher possibilities of man on earth can afford to pass them by.

The Christ is here considered as the Model man, representing the normal development of a true spiritual manhood. A special claim of this exposition is the recovery of the Christ method (the secret of regeneration), by which a like attainment may be reached in the ordinary lifetime of each individual. The result is based on the universal law of organism, which makes the body an organic instrument, and physical expression of the spirit it embodies, so that as the spirit of man unfolds from within, the organism becomes correspondingly transformed as its instrument of expression. Spiritual regeneration, which effects the immediate evolution, or awakening and bringing forth of the spiritual nature and powers, thus involves the entire transfiguration of body as well as soul.

This, when completed, lifts man to the level of a new and higher order of life represented in the Christ. A life of spiritual supremacy, illumination and mastery. A life above contagion and disease as above temptation and sin, "perfect even as the Father in Heaven is perfect."

On this basis also is presented the true method of Mental or Spiritual Healing which is destined sooner or later to abolish the use of drugs in sickness, as it will ultimately banish disease. "They shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them: they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover."

JOHN W. LOVELL CO.'S RECENT PUBLICATIONS.

Clothed with the Sun. BY ANNA (BONUS) KINGSFORD AND
EDITED BY EDWARD MAITLAND

"A worthy companion to 'The Perfect Way,' as a lasting monument to Mrs. Kingsford's wonderful genius, great spirituality, and marvellous lucidity of insight into the hidden things of Nature and Religion."—FROM AN ARTICLE IN *Lucifer* BY MADAME BLAVATSKY.

CLOTH, GILT, \$1.50.

The Perfect Way. BY ANNA (BONUS) KINGSFORD AND
EDWARD MAITLAND

From the preface to the French edition in *L'Aurore*, a Paris monthly magazine of Esoteric Christianity, under the direction of the Countess of Caithness and Duchesse de Pomar.

"The scientific and literary qualities of this book place it among works of the highest order in the hermetic (interpretative) literature of the present time. It responds in large measure to the imperious need of our age, being at once a comprehensive synthesis of the past and reconstruction of the future. Its originality consists in its exposition in the plain language of modern philosophy, or ideas heretofore enveloped in strange symbols or obscure formulas. The Christ disclosed to us by it is not the historic, but the ideal and symbolic Christ, the perfect Initiate, or Son of Man become Son of God, whom every man should endeavor to realize in himself by means of the development of his highest faculties. * * * * The work is executed with as great brilliancy as solidity. A lofty inspiration and a profound intuition, combined with great reasoning power; the scientific spirit and knowledge of natural science; a serious study of the Bible and of the Fathers of the Church; great discernment in the interpretation of symbols; and finally, a profound experience of occult phenomenon, with the coolness and judgment necessary to determine their relative values, and distinguish reality from illusion :—such are the rare qualities which make the exceptional merit of this work, and which have enabled its authors to produce one of the most excellent scientific expositions of secret doctrine known to us, and an account of initiation admirable for its logic and lucidity.

May the translation of this book minister to the diffusion of Esoteric Christianity, of that universal religion which is destined to restore to the sciences their organic unity, to the arts their lost ideal, to distracted humanity its equilibrium, to the human soul its lost country, to earthly life its divine aspiration and hope.

EDOUARD SCHURE."

CLOTH, GILT, \$1.00. PAPER COVER, 50 CENTS.

JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

JOHN W. LOVELL CO.'S RECENT PUBLICATIONS.

Magic—White and Black. - BY FRANZ HARTMANN, M. D.

This work has been revised, re-written and enlarged especially for this edition by the author.

CLOTH, GILT, \$1.00. PAPER COVER, 50 CENTS.

Christian Theosophy Series.

THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE,	CLOTH, \$2.00	
THE PATHWAY OF THE SPIRIT,	"	1.00, PAPER, 50c.
THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT,	"	IN PREPARATION.
THE LAW OF THE PERFECT LIFE,	"	IN PREPARATION.

Now ready—No. II, of the series, entitled

The Pathway of the Spirit. BY JOHN HAMLIN DEWEY, D.D.

A GUIDE TO INSPIRATION, ILLUMINATION AND DIVINE REALIZATION ON EARTH.

All who are interested in the higher possibilities of man on earth, whatever their creed or philosophy of life, should read this book. The innate powers of the human spirit and the law and conditions of the immediate illumination and transfiguration of man, are elucidated with a clearness that will interest and convince.

The secret of the Christ and his transcendent life—the perfect way of attainment—and His central doctrine of God and man, are interpreted in the light of a true spiritual illumination, as the open door to a Corresponding Realization by all men,—illustrated in Apostolic experience.

The humblest seeker may here find the key to his own spiritual emancipation and illumination, while the advanced disciple will find helpful suggestion and inspiration in its pages. It shows the relation between the latest suggestions of science and the deepest experiences and loftiest inspirations of prophets, seers and saints, and reconciles the most rigid demands of the intellect with the deepest yearnings of the spiritual nature.

No. III., soon to be issued, unfolds the specific nature and legitimate sphere of the psychic powers of the sixth sense, their true cultivation and exercise, and the development of a true occult science.

No. IV. (in preparation), specifically unfolds "The Law of the Perfect Life," as applied to individual experience and the new social order of the Kingdom of God on earth.

JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.



PR 5112 .N25 .B34
The baffled conspirators

C.1

Stanford University Libraries



3 6105 036 723 810

DATE DUE			

Stanford University Libraries

Stanford, Ca.

94305

